What Now?
Experiences of Everyday Unemployment among Black Graduates in South Africa

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A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Human Geography
26 April 2024

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Abstract

Governments and international development organisations have long advanced the idea that education is the best tool for achieving social mobility. This idea has also been internalised by people all over the world. However, for an increasing number of young people, especially (but not exclusively) in the global South, the link between higher education and work has become weaker and weaker. This thesis explores young people's experiences of this increasingly global phenomenon in South Africa. In particular, I investigate the experiences of unemployment among young, Black university graduates in South Africa. The issue of graduate unemployment has received significant attention in media and social media spaces, presumably because it troubles the aforementioned link that has been made between education and jobs. In the academic literature, however, studies on graduate unemployment have mostly been limited to quantitative investigations of the causes of unemployment among graduates. In this thesis, I aim to take an approach to studying graduate unemployment that takes seriously the complex economic, social, moral and emotional experiences of unemployment.

The thesis uses eight months of digital fieldwork conducted during the Covid-19 pandemic, and related lockdowns, to examine the lives of the young men and the young women that I interviewed as they attempted to transition from education to the kind of employment that they aspire to. In order to develop a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of these experiences, I use "everyday unemployment" as a conceptual framework, where the everyday is made up of relationalities, temporalities, and digital spaces. The first empirical chapter (Chapter Four) focuses on the role that education plays in shaping these experiences of unemployment, highlighting the ways in which the ANC government's own processes of futuring result in disjunctures between policy and discourse and young people's realities. The second empirical chapter (Chapter Five), in an attempt to understand the ways in which these young people cope with and navigate unemployment, focuses on ordinary processes of future-making among youth. Under the themes of work, entrepreneurship and migration, I show how young people's orientations to specific futures can help us understand their present. And, finally, the third empirical chapter (Chapter Six) brings together literatures on everyday temporalities of unemployment and relationalities to demonstrate the ways in which unemployment has significant consequences for heteronormative social reproduction and sociality for young people. The thesis, therefore, makes important and timely contributions to academic work on young people in waithood, higher education, future-making, everyday youth temporalities and relationalities.

Dedication

To my grandmother,

Sesana Sannah Malapane

Ngiyabonga kusipha lutsandvo lwemfundvo njengemtukulu wakho.

Thank you for instilling in me, and in many generations of this family to come, the love for education and learning.

Acknowledgements

This thesis is the product of so many people's love, care, empathy, support and generosity. What follows is my (likely insufficient) attempt to thank everyone who has contributed to getting the project to the finish line.

The first group of people that I would like to thank are the young people who participated in this research. You were all very generous with your time and your thoughts, and in sharing what have been very difficult experiences. Thank you for trusting me with your stories. I hope that I have done them justice and will continue to, and that this research will shine a spotlight on yet another set of challenges facing young people in South Africa.

This thesis would also not have been possible without the continuous support, patience, encouragement and care given by my supervisor, Professor Patricia Daley. In this short paragraph, I can't begin to describe and acknowledge almost five years of engaging, expert academic guidance and concern for my wellbeing. This research has gone in directions that I never could have imagined when I was just starting the DPhil. And I thank you for creating an encouraging, inspiring, intellectually stimulating and warm space throughout the process.

This emotion-filled DPhil journey has been shared with many wonderful people. I started my journey in Oxford with Lee, who has been a wonderful source of support and encouragement while in Oxford and from Joburg. Thank you for being so thoughtful always, taking an interest in my research and always reminding me that I am capable. I miss you. I feel so lucky that my and Lillian's paths crossed again in Oxford. We've really been through all of it together. Thank you for always being so ready to help, and making me do all of the things that I didn't want to do but had to. I miss your laugh and sharing a coffee with you in the geography department. Thank you to Jelani, for always being enthusiastic about brainstorming and giving feedback on works in progress, to Brian for always being willing to listen and for the college dinners, and Naomi for being the best writing buddy. And finally, thanks to David for sending reading links, opportunities to present and generally being a great person to talk to about this process, and Anne for the constant encouragement.

To my London family, Tebello, Bugei and Rutendo - thank you for holding me up in these last couple of months. You have shown me so much grace and compassion, and also made sure that I was taking care of myself and taking breaks.

I would like to thank the Rhodes Trust for the financial support throughout the DPhil. I would especially like to thank Mary, I have always left your office feeling reassured and encouraged to keep going.

Finally, I would like to express my thanks and my love to my family: my mom, Suzan and my brother, Katlego. This DPhil has been an incredibly difficult undertaking, and to do it while being thousands of kilometres away from my family has been doubly hard. Thank you, mom, for always calling to make sure that I am taking care of myself and to remind me of how much I am loved. And thank you, little bro, for always believing in me. I wish that I could share this achievement with my father, whose support (along with my mother's) throughout my schooling years has led me to this point.

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List of Acronyms

AfDA – private university in South Africa offering arts education

ANC – African National Congress

ATS – Applicant Tracking System

CPUT – Cape Peninsula University of Technology

DHET – Department of Higher Education and Training

DM – Direct Message

DUT – Durban University of Technology

DWYPD – Department for Women, Youth and People with Disabilities

GDP – Gross Domestic Product

GEAR – Growth, Employment, and Redistribution

HR – Human Resources

MENA – Middle East and North Africa

NDP – National Development Plan

NEET – Not in education or employment

NPC – National Planning Commission

NSFAS – National Student Financial Aid Scheme

NWU – North-West University

NYDA – National Youth Development Agency

OECD – Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development

QLFS – Quarterly Labour Force Survey

RDP – Reconstruction and Development Plan

SABC – South African Broadcasting Corporation

SONA – State of the Nation Address

SRD – Social Relief of Distress

STEM – Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics

TOEFL – Test of English as a Foreign Language

TUT – Tshwane University of Technology

UCT – University of Cape Town

UFH – University of Fort Hare

UJ – University of Johannesburg

UKZN – University of KwaZulu-Natal

UL – University of Limpopo

UNISA – University of South Africa

UNIVEN – University of Venda

UP – University of Pretoria

VUT – Vaal University of Technology

WEF – World Economic Forum

WIL – Work-Integrated Learning

Wits – University of the Witwatersrand

WTO – World Trade Organisation

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1 Black, youth graduate unemployment in South Africa: unpacking the problem, the rationale and the context

1.1. Introduction

In 2019, Thabo[1] graduated with a National Diploma in Mechatronic Engineering from Tshwane University of Technology (TUT). When he was applying for university, he knew that he wanted to become an engineer:

> "I made the choice to do electrical engineering at first, and the reason for this is that I've always wanted to be able to fix things on my own. I've always been curious about fixing anything— a fridge, basically anything that's broken. I wanted to do electric but then I got confused because the other things I wanted to fix were mechanically based. By the time I went to high school, I learnt of this course that I did, which is mechatronics engineering, and it's a combination of both mechanical and electric. And I became intrigued by it. I did research about it, and I figured I might as well do it because it's a combination of both."

Thabo recalled feeling very hopeful about the future as a university student:

> "While I was busy doing the qualification, I thought maybe if I just finish everything, I was gonna be okay. I was gonna get a job – a robotics job or an automation job. That's what I was thinking."

And although he often oscillated between feeling desperately hopeless and assuredly hopeful, this particular version of the future no longer seemed guaranteed. When I spoke to Thabo for the first time in March 2021, he had been back home for over a year and a half where he lived with his immediate and extended family in a household of eleven. He had been unemployed for about seven months following a series of exploitative, disappointing, and even dangerous attempts to find and keep a job as an engineer. At the start of this period of unemployment, Thabo would "just wake up and apply [for jobs] every day". Then he attempted to make some money by doing casual "handy man jobs" for people in his community. However, he said:

> "… it wasn't really successful because at the place where I am – the community – it's full of people who know me. So, they don't have the confidence that, 'Okay, Thabo can fix this for us.' I didn't really succeed in this area."

[1] The names provided in this thesis are pseudonyms.

He ended up feeling demotivated because “nothing works out”. He went from applying for twenty to thirty jobs a day to applying for two or three jobs a day - mostly out of guilt. He stopped trying to find alternative means for making an income. Instead, he preferred to spend all of his time in his room, where he watched television series. Passing time in this way served as a distraction from a bleak present and a promised, desired and imagined future that appeared to be slipping away:

> “I feel really terrible about where I am now… I feel bad about it. I feel that I am a failure in my family ‘cause they looked up to me. They thought, maybe, this is our breakthrough, that now life is gonna change. But me having messed things up the way that I did, I feel terrible about the situation… I try to forget about it each and every day. That’s why I can’t spend my days just thinking. I just need to do something. Hence why I watch series. If I’m not watching series, I try to fix things – just not to think about it. ‘Cause the more I think about it, the more painful it is to me.”

In this thesis, I use qualitative data collected over eight months to document young people’s experiences of graduate unemployment in contemporary South Africa. In particular, I ask:

> *How do young, Black graduates experience unemployment in contemporary South Africa?*

This thesis examines the lives of young men and women as they navigate the transition from university to employment. I argue for the importance of studying the everyday experiences of unemployment, with a focus on relationality, temporalities and digital space. Through three empirical chapters, I examine disconnections between government discourses and young people’s realities, explore how temporalities of the future both inform and are informed by the present, and investigate the impact of unemployment on everyday relationships. Ultimately, the thesis contributes to understanding the intricacies of unemployment, higher education, everyday future-making and lived time among unemployed graduates in contemporary South Africa.

In this introductory chapter, I situate the aforementioned question in the relevant context. In section one, I review the literature on graduate unemployment in South Africa, highlighting the dominance of quantitative inquiry within much of the existing literature. In this section, I also introduce the sub-questions that are answered in the empirical chapters of the thesis. In the second section of this chapter, I discuss the state of the higher education sector and

the labour market in order to provide essential background to the study. And, finally, I present summaries of each of the chapters that follow.

1.2. Graduate unemployment in South Africa

The problem of graduate unemployment has received a great deal of media attention over the years. News articles have covered protests organised by unemployed graduates in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu Natal (Manabe, 2017; Njoli, 2018); numerous panel discussions about skills mismatches, the lack of work experience among young graduates, the issue of slow (but often no) economic growth, and outdated university curricula have been broadcast widely (Africa News 2016; Mashifana *et al*., 2023; Mncayi, 2021; Newzroom Afrika, 2022; SABC News, 2019; SABC News, 2021; SABC News, 2023a; SABC News, 2024; Sunday World 2022); and young people's experiences have been the focus of various news segments, in which they highlight the difficulties that they face in the job seeking, the frustration of endless dead-end internships and the negative effects that being unemployed has had on the ability to provide for themselves and their families, but also on their self-esteem and mental health (eNCA, 2022; Majova, 2018; Mtembu, 2022; Newzroom Afrika, 2020; SABC News 2023b; SABC News 2023c; SABC News, 2023d; Willis, 2023).

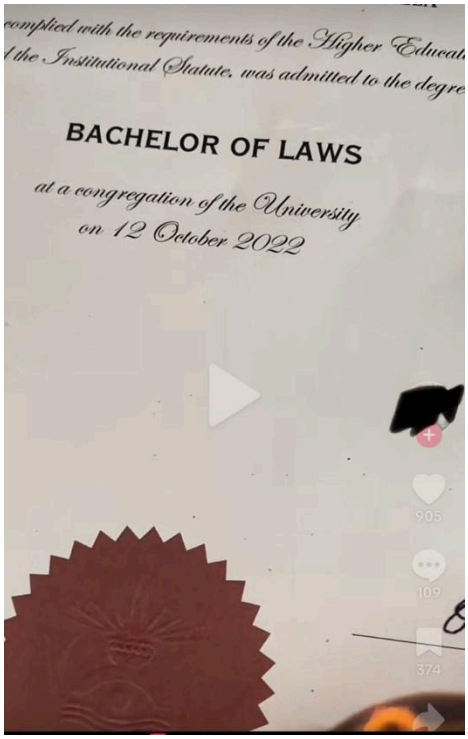
Graduate unemployment has also been an oft-discussed topic on social media sites like Twitter (now known as 'X') and LinkedIn. One of the most viral Twitter posts related to graduate unemployment was a photograph of engineering graduate Anthea Malwandle, presented below, begging for a job at a busy intersection in Johannesburg in 2016 (Maseko, 2016).

Figure 1: The photograph of Anthea that was posted on Twitter (source: Nomsa Maseko, BBC News)

Looking for jobs in this way is not an unfamiliar strategy. Young, Black men holding similar placards that advertise their services in plumbing, painting, gardening and construction are a ubiquitous (and arguably uncontroversial and now unnoticeable) part of the urban and even suburban landscape in major South African cities. However, Anthea's approach was described as "innovative" (Maseko, 2016), and she was applauded for "putting her pride aside" (Twitter user) in order to find work. Her strategy "captured the heart of the nation" in ways that it would not for the men who do this every day, and I argue that it is because the image troubles the largely taken-for-granted connection that has been made (by governments, development agencies, and repeated by the populace) between the completion of higher education studies and employment or particular white-collar, professional images of success. The expectation is that university education should be able to shield one from the kind of indignities that the men looking for low-paid jobs experience on a daily basis. Therefore, when it doesn't, not only are people shocked, but they are also moved to act to ensure that Anthea, who has done everything that she was told to do to be successful, gets appropriately rewarded. Within a few weeks of trending on Twitter and

appearing as a guest on radio talk shows, Anthea was invited for an interview at a Johannesburg Stock Exchange-listed company (I have not been able to find any information about the outcome of this interview or other updates about Anthea).

Hoping to similarly grab the attention of employers, young people use the #HireAGraduate to advertise their availability and willingness to work alongside their CVs, and they also use the hashtag to look for opportunities posted by recruiters looking to hire university graduates. However, the hashtag has also served as a platform that young people have used to vent their frustrations, express disappointment, and connect with other young people who are in similar positions. More recently, on a different social media platform (TikTok), a young woman uploaded a video in which she records herself setting her degree certificate alight. The video was captioned: "'Education is the key to success' – they said. I'm tired." Screenshots from this video (presented below) made their way to Twitter, where thousands of users interacted with the post. What was surprising about the reactions on Twitter was that it seemed as though there were as many people who sympathised with her frustration as there were people who scolded her for not being patient enough. Social media can be a double-edged sword for unemployed graduates looking for emotional or social support (something which I discuss in Chapter Six of this thesis).



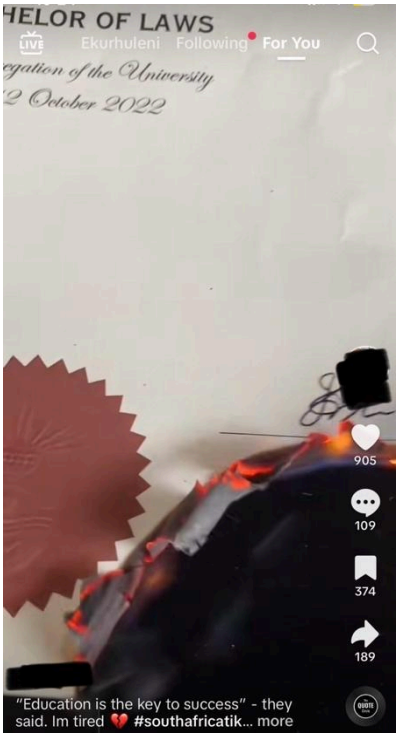


Figure 2: Screenshots of a TikTok in which a young person burns their degree certificate

In the academic literature, scholars have mostly been interested in determining the size of the graduate unemployment problem, its causes and the factors that can put some graduates at higher risk of being unemployed. Using the results of postal survey responses from over 2,000 South Africans, Moleke (2002) studied the employment experiences of graduates in the labour market between 1990 and 1998. He found that although, compared to people in the labour market who did not have a tertiary education, graduates faced lower unemployment rates, shorter periods of unemployment and higher salaries when they did get jobs, these advantages were not shared equally by all graduates: "Africans, females, those who studied humanities and arts, and those who studied at historically black universities had the highest proportion of those unemployed" (Moleke, 2002: 19). Studies that came later reached similar conclusions, and focused on understanding the root causes of graduate unemployment in order to make effective recommendations. Pauw *et al*. (2006) argued that this problem was caused by the lack of "necessary skills and experience to be considered even for entry-level positions" (and, as a result, the employers' reluctance to hire them) (p. 2), and that the government efforts to address this should focus on long-term strategies for improving the basic education system (Pauw *et al*., 2006; Pauw *et a*l., 2008).

From the 2010s, however, there were dynamic debates about whether graduate unemployment was indeed an issue in South Africa, and one that warranted attention and intervention from the government and other stakeholders. This was largely driven by two economists from the University of Stellenbosch, who declared that unemployment was "a much-exaggerated problem" (Van Der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012). Based on a review of four studies which investigate the prevalence of graduate unemployment between 1995 and 2005[2], Van Der Berg and Van Broekhuizen (2012) argue that the authors' use of data that is old and a definition of "graduate" that is too broad (i.e.: to include everyone who has any post-Matric qualification, including certificates and diplomas as well as degrees) undermines their conclusions. Based on their own analysis, in which they use more recent data and a narrower definition of "graduate" (which includes only those with university degrees), the authors conclude that there is "no evidence of a high level or a markedly upward trend in graduate unemployment", and that "even by the standards of prosperous economic times in

[2] The studies are: Bhorat, 2004; DPRU, 2006; Pauw et al., 2008; Kraak, 2010

the countries of Western Europe", the levels of graduate unemployment in South Africa are very low and constitute no cause for concern (Van Der Berg & Van Broekhuizen, 2012: 21). Using the data analysis performed by Van Der Berg & Van Broekhuizen (2012), the Centre for Development and Enterprises published a report in which they conclude that "the myth that graduates in general, and Black graduates in particular, are struggling to find work needs to be put to bed" (CDE, 2013: 1). In another study, Van Broekhuizen (2016) maintains that graduate unemployment is "not nearly as problematic as is often asserted" but acknowledges that there are "racially-delineated differentials", which he attributes to "heterogeneity in the quality and type of higher education institutions" because attending an "historically disadvantaged institution"[3] is linked to the probability of being unemployed (Van Broekhuizen, 2016: 17). However, given the history of South Africa and the slow efforts to redress inequalities in the education sector, Black students continue to represent the majority of the student population in historically disadvantaged universities while white students are overrepresented in historically advantaged universities. For instance, in 2013, white students made up 3% of the student population of Durban University of Technology while Black students made up 81% (Swartz *et al*., 2018: 136). However, at the University of Cape Town in 2012, 42% of the student population was white students while Black students made up 33% (Swartz *et al*., 2018: 135). If Black students are more likely to enrol in and graduate from historically disadvantaged institutions, this means that race remains a significant issue in relation to post-graduation success. I discuss the higher education sector, including the size of the student population, in more detail in a later section of this chapter.

In response to this work by van der Berg and van Broekhuizen, Tivaringe (2019) argues that the alarm around graduate unemployment has empirical credence. He finds that while Van Der Berg and Van Broekhuizen's (2012) interventions about methodology and the relevance of the data are important, their conclusions are puzzling because following their methodological advice yields results which show that "unemployment among Black graduates is a serious concern" (Tivaringe, 2019: 18). These findings are consistent with other studies which show that race and socioeconomic status were the strongest predictors of unemployment among graduates (Baldry, 2016; Kraak, 2015).

[3] See section 1.3.1 of this chapter for more on historically (dis)advantaged HEIs

In the last ten years, the academic literature has mirrored the pre-2010 agenda. The starting point for most scholars is that graduate unemployment is a problem, and they focus their attention on attempting to understanding the causes ("objective" and perceived) and on identifying solutions that hold the most promise (Maka *et al*., 2021; Mncayi & Meyer, 2022; Graham *et al*., 2019; Mseleku, 2022; Mokonyane-Motha *et al*., 2023).

What all of this literature has in common is adopting a largely quantitative approach to studying graduate unemployment – an approach which oftentimes masks more than it reveals. And because quantitative research is limited to only that which is quantifiable, the experiences and voices of the young people remain absent. These studies constitute disembodied approaches that fail to take into account the weight of joblessness. Unemployment is a complex economic, social as well as deeply personal and moral issue, the dynamics of which cannot easily be captured, represented and understood through macro, statistical approaches. While these studies tell us who is and isn't unemployed and which groups are more likely to be at risk, they don't tell us anything about the young graduates who accept one exploitative, low-paid internship after another just to get their foot in the door (Knight, 2019) or about the shame, frustration and disappointment that many graduates describe feeling when they are unemployed. Given, firstly, how prevalent unemployment is in South Africa and in much of the global South and, secondly, how central employment has become to our material survival, self-esteem and our relationships and social lives, I argue that we need to ask not just what causes unemployment, but also what it means for the people who are unemployed and how they live with unemployment.

There are a few studies that add experiential depth to the quantitative studies that I have reviewed above. Tinashe & Chinyamurindi (2019) study the experiences of graduates in the labour market and the strategies that they use to overcome the barriers that they face in securing work. In this study, we hear directly from the young people about their struggles, which included experiences of racism, the high costs of job-seeking and the lack of offers for permanent employment after internships (which was described as "a new form of black slavery" by one of the participants in this study) (Tinashe & Chinyamurindi, 2019: 16). However, the authors draw conclusions that are unsympathetic and make recommendations that contradict these young people's experiences. On the one hand, they argue that the

education system has not done enough to prepare graduates for the labour market, but they also claim that the graduates are entitled, relying on their degrees and not being "proactive to improve their employment opportunities" (Tinashe & Chinyamurindi, 2019: 23). And while they quote students who talk about the challenges of being unemployed after having completed a six-month to two-year internship, the authors recommend that the government should offer more work experience opportunities as a solution to unemployment – without addressing the challenges that the young people highlighted (Tinashe & Chinyamurindi, 2019: 20, 24). These interpretations are consistent with neoliberal ideas of self-responsibility, but also with notions of "lazy youth" that are commonly held by elders (and even circulate among young people themselves, as I show in Chapter Six of this thesis) (Dawson & Fouksman, 2020; Honwana, 2012; Mains; 2011; Masquelier, 2013; Newell, 2012; Ralph, 2008).

In another study, van Lill and Bakker (2022) focus on the narratives of unemployed graduates and show that there are six plotlines that the graduates have in common as they attempt to achieve their career goals: the upward mobility of higher education access (progression); the ups and downs of higher education (progression and regression); the highlight of graduation (progression); the initial disruption of employment expectations, which "came unexpectedly and caused great disappointment and distress after the investments made to complete a higher education qualification" (regression); increased hopelessness and disenchantment (further regression); and seeking new avenues to achieve goals (progression). The narratives tell us what matters to young people, which can be discerned from what they spend a lot of time talking about, where, in their trajectory, they choose to start their story and how their tone changes with different topics and questions (van Lill & Bakker, 2022). However, as I discuss in this thesis, the plotlines that are outlined here are far more complex and rarely follow sequentially, with some of the described stages happening simultaneously or in succession over very short periods of time. Kgotlhane *et al*. (2018) take a more localised approach as they explore the challenges that are faced by unemployed graduates in the northern Limpopo province of South Africa. They explore many of the same themes as the aforementioned authors, while also highlighting the role that "close relatives, spouses and friends" play in supporting their material and emotional wellbeing, as well as how these

same relationships can cause them to withdraw from public or shared spaces due to feelings of shame (Kgotlhane *et al*., 2018: 11479).

My aim is to contribute to this literature by providing an account of experiences of graduate unemployment in South Africa that acknowledges the ways in which unemployment can be experienced as overwhelming, pervasive and seeping into every corner of one's life. In order to investigate these experiences, I ask the following sub-questions:

1. *What role does higher education play in shaping experiences of unemployment?*
2. *How do young people cope with and navigate graduate unemployment?*
3. *In what ways do kin and friendships shape graduate unemployment while simultaneously being shaped by it?*

To answer these questions, I depart from mainstream, quantitative, economic and policy-focused approaches to understand how graduate unemployment is experienced. I turn attention to the everyday and everyday life, which, I argue in Chapter Two, is characterised by relationality, temporalities and digital space. Using the conceptual framework of "everyday unemployment" and literatures on African youth in waithood (i.e.: Mains, 2011; Masquelier, 2013), I provide an account of unemployment as it is experienced by young people in South Africa. In doing so, the overall contribution that I make is uncovering the much quieter but powerful ways in which people cope with economic crises like unemployment. I aim, therefore, to contribute to new understandings of the lived experiences of graduate unemployment in South Africa by uncovering all of the different ways in which they cope with and navigate unemployment.

Focusing on the everyday allows me to accomplish two things in this study: firstly, it complicates understandings of (graduate) unemployment that centre crisis and temporariness when waged work, as Barchiesi (2011) and Monteith *et al.* (2021) argue, is a historical and geographical exception that is only accessible to the global minority (and is likely to increasingly be so). Treating unemployment as crisis, spectacle and temporary denies people recognition, because their lives are seen as being on pause or in waiting for waged work. In order to really understand what it is that people are experiencing, it is important to meet them where they are, and take their circumstances seriously, as this study

does by adopting the conceptual lens of the everyday. Secondly, focusing on the everyday also highlights the ways in which unemployment features in daily life as overwhelming and pervasive. The veneration of waged work under neoliberal capitalism means that the lack of waged work can become difficult to escape, from both a material as well as a psycho-social and emotional perspective. A focus on the everyday takes into account the weight, embeddedness, complexity and "all-consuming-ness" of unemployment, contributing to furthering our understanding of what it is that people experience and what they do to get by.

1.3. Setting the scene: higher education, unemployment and labour markets in contemporary South Africa

1.3.1 Changes and continuities in South African higher education

Before the 1800s, higher education was only accessible to those who could travel from Southern Africa to Europe (Jappie, 2020: 190). But by 1869, four institutions of higher education (colleges) had been established across the country (Jappie, 2020: 190). In 1873, the University of the Cape of Good Hope was established (later renamed the University of South Africa) (Soudien, 2021). Co-founded by Cecil John Rhodes for the purposes of training young white men to further the colonial project, it was the first fully accredited university in "the Union of South Africa" (Kidd, 1910: 42; Soudien, 2021: 136). By the time that apartheid becomes legislated in 1948, there were ten universities and colleges, but only one of them, the University College of Fort Hare, was "a Black university" (Soudien, 2021: 136). A decade later, the apartheid government passed the Extension of University Education Act (1959), through which the government prohibited universities from enrolling Black students while simultaneously establishing separate universities and colleges for Black, Coloured and Indian students (Jappie, 2020: 191). This resulted in the creation of a network of universities that were divided along both racial and ethnic lines.

In 1994, the new democratic government inherited an inequitable and unjust higher education system that was made up of 36 racially segregated and unequally developed universities and colleges (Jappie, 2020; Soudien, 2021). In response, a process of restructuring and transforming the system began with the appointment of the National Commission on Higher Education (NCHE), whose broad aim was to investigate "all aspects of

Higher Education [in order to] make appropriate policy recommendations" (Moja & Cloete, 1996: 10). Based on the findings and recommendations of the NCHE, the government adopted a massification strategy and restructured the higher education landscape by merging higher education institutions so that by the end of 2005, there were 23 universities and universities of technology (down from 36) (CHE, 2022; Mzwanga, 2019). These interventions were made to address the historical exclusion of Black people from HEIs under apartheid and to attempt to bridge the gap between the racial and territory-based higher education institutions.

There are currently 26 public universities in South Africa: eleven general academic universities (which offer mostly theory-focused degrees), six universities of technology (which offer mostly vocational degrees and diplomas) and nine comprehensive universities (which offer both) (DHET, 2023; Soudien, 2021). Of these universities, twelve of them are considered historically disadvantaged universities, eight of which (UFH, UL, UNIVEN, CPUT, DUT, TUT and VUT) were attended by the participants of this study. Table 1 shows how the 26 universities are classified, as well as the number of participants from this research project who attended the different universities.

According to the Council on Higher Education (CHE) (2022), undergraduate diplomas are "vocational in orientation", and aim to produce graduates who "can demonstrate focused knowledge and skills in a particular field and will typically have gained experience in applying such knowledge and skills in a workplace context" (CHE, 2022: 95). A degree, on the other hand, is meant "to provide well-rounded, broad education that equips graduates with the knowledge base, theory and methodology of disciplines and fields of study, and to enable them to demonstrate initiative and responsibility in an academic or professional context" (CHE, 2022: 95). Based on my discussions with the graduates who participated in this study, however, it didn't appear that this distinction was considered when making plans about their higher education studies. While they had preferences and aspirations related to study subject and, for some, the university they wanted to attend, the overarching priority was on gaining access to university.

Table 1: Universities in South Africa and Research Participants' Attendance

Type	**University**	**No. of participants**
General academic universities	University of Cape Town	2
	University of Fort Hare	2
	University of the Free State	
	University of Pretoria	3
	Rhodes University	1
	Stellenbosch University	
	University of the Western Cape	
	University of the Witwatersrand	4
	University of KwaZulu-Natal	
	University of Limpopo	1
	North-West University	2
Universities of technology	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	2
	Central University of Technology	
	Durban University of Technology	2
	Mangosuthu University of Technology	
	Tshwane University of Technology	3
	Vaal University of Technology	3
Comprehensive universities	University of Johannesburg	7
	Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University	
	University of South Africa	3
	Walter Sisulu University of Technology	
	University of Venda	1
	University of Zululand	
	University of Mpumalanga	
	Sefako Makgatho Health Sciences University	
	Sol Plaatjie University	
Other		
Private university	AfDA	1

Over the last three decades, considerable progress has been made with regards to increasing overall higher education enrolment, and the enrolment of Black students in particular. Soudien (2021: 132) argues that the changes in South African higher education between 1994 and 2020 see it tip over from being an elite system to a mass system. In 1993, there were 473,000 students enrolled in public universities (CHE, 2022: 57). And in 2021, there

were 1,068,046 students enrolled – more than doubling over past 28 years (DHET, 2023: 10). In the National Development Plan, the government has set the target of reaching 1.62 million student enrolment by 2030 (NPC, 2012). Over the years, the headcount enrolment for Black students has also increased. Between 2005 and 2015, the number of Black students in public universities increased from 446,946 to 696,320, and then to 820,619 by 2018 (CHE, 2022: 41). The proportion of Black students enrolled in public universities similarly increased from 61% in 2005 to 76% in 2018 (CHE, 2022: 41). The distribution of Black students within the university system also changed significantly, as 41% of all Black students were in historically white institutions by 1999 (CHE, 2022: 41).

The increase in enrolments, especially among Black students, can be attributed to interventions in financial aid as well as in admissions policies and selection criteria. To widen student access, the government formally established the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) by statute in 1996 in order to grant loans and bursaries to eligible students attending public HEIs in South Africa (Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016: 7). Since then, the number of university students receiving funding through NSFAS annually has increased significantly from 83,251 in 2000 to 393,767 in 2019, with a target for 450 000 by 2024 (DHET, 2019: 39; NSFAS, 2016: 6). However, alongside the early implementation of NSFAS, there were continuous cuts (for over two decades) to the government's overall higher education spending following the adoption of the neoliberal GEAR development policy in 1996, leading to a mismatch in government aspirations for increased access to higher education and the reality of the funding that was provided to universities (Cailitz & Fourie, 2016; Sehoole & Adeyemo, 2016). In response to these cuts, which constituted these institutions' largest source of revenue, universities steadily increased tuition fees (CHE, 2022). According to Cailitz and Fourie (2016), whose research investigates the evolution of university fees over a century at Stellenbosch University, tuition fees had, by 2016, become significantly more expensive in real terms than over the last half-century, and that the post-1994 increase in the cost of university education was mostly the result of rapid increases in the price of tuition. After it was announced in 2015 that there was a proposed 11.5% fee hike for 2016, students across the country shut down university campuses in protest (Areff & Spies, 2017). In response to student demands, the government announced the provision of fee-free education, administered through NSFAS, for students coming from households with a

combined annual income of R350,000 or less (Areff & Spies, 2017). In 2024, the government also announced a R3.8 billion loan scheme intended to improve access for "the missing middle" students (i.e.: students whose annual combined household income is between R350,000 and R600,000) (Setho, 2024). It is estimated that the scheme, which will also be administered by NSFAS, will fund 47% of all missing middle students (around 32,000 of them) (Setho, 2024). Students who obtain an average of 70% or above and finish within the prescribed course time will have 50% of their loan converted to a bursary (Setho, 2024). Research shows that financial aid-based interventions have been successful in helping increase participation in the higher education system (Pillay *et al*., 2021).

In South Africa, the criteria for admission into a university programme differs from university to university. Obtaining a National Senior Certificate (NSC), through completion of school-leaving exams in the final year of high school (also known as matric exams), is the minimum qualification required for university entrance (Jappie, 2020: 193). Most learners will write exams for a minimum of seven subjects in their final year of school. And at minimum, a learner must achieve a level three (see table 2) across four recognised 20-credit subjects as well as a level two in the language of learning and teaching of the higher education institution to be eligible for entry into a National Diploma programme (Jappie, 2020: 195). For a Bachelor's degree, a learner must achieve at least a level four across four recognised 20-credit subjects and a level three average in the language of learning and teaching of the HEI (Jappie, 2020: 195). However, depending on the university and the programme(s) that the learner is applying to, it is likely that they would need to meet additional requirements, such as getting a certain minimum score in the National Benchmarking Test (a standardised entrance test used to gauge linguistic, numerical and mathematical ability), doing a particular combination of high school subjects, having to achieve a minimum NSC level that is higher than the national minimum standard or a particular Admissions Points Score (APS) (calculated out of 600). During his final (matric) year, Thabo applied to study engineering TUT and at Wits. However, he didn't meet the minimum requirements for a Bachelor's degree at Wits but was offered a place in the TUT National Diploma programme. To gain entrance into Wits, he would have had to achieve a

minimum APS score of 42, as well as NSC level five achievements in English, Mathematics and Physical Sciences[4]. However, the Wits website states the following:

> "Applicants with English, Mathematics and Physical Sciences at Level 5 will be waitlisted, subject to place availability. Generally, applicants who achieve Level 6 in English, Mathematics and Physical Sciences stand a greater chance of being accepted." (University of the Witwatersrand)

The national Department for Higher Education and Training (DHET) notes that "a starting point and major instrument for creating a demographically diverse, equitable student body is a university's admissions policy" (DHET, 2023: 71). At UCT, for example, a new admissions policy was introduced in 2016 (UCT News, 2014). In addition to race and gender, the university used the following indicators to ascertain the applicant's "state of disadvantage" for admissions purposes: home language, parental and grand-parental level of education, school of the applicant, and whether the applicant's family depended on social grants (DHET, 2023: 71). These criteria allow UCT to address disadvantage and inequity in "a more sophisticated and nuanced way", one that goes beyond race as a proxy for disadvantage (DHET, 2023: 71). However, the university also ensures that they meet their annual racial equity targets. Therefore, if the "disadvantage scorecard" produces insufficient numbers of Black students to whom the university will grant admission, a portion of the intake in each faculty is selected based on race (DHET, 2023: 71). Before this admissions policy, UCT had implemented one that focused solely on race as a means of ascertaining disadvantage (SABC News, 2014). Based on an analysis of that policy, Kerr *et al*. (2017) found that the affirmative action intervention had a significant effect on the racial distribution of the students that received an offer to study at UCT. They found that the programme was well-targeted, with students from lower socio-economic backgrounds being the main beneficiaries of the policy (Kerr *et al*., 2017: 516).

Table 2: National Senior Certificate Grade Classification

Level	**Percentage Grade**
7	80+
6	70 – 79
5	60 – 69
4	50 – 59

[4] As of March 2024, a Diploma in Mechatronic Engineering, the qualification that Thabo says he was awarded, is not listed as a qualification on the TUT website. However, it may have been phased out since 2014 to 2020.

3	40 – 49
2	30 – 39
1	30 and below

Despite these reports of progress being made in enrolments and in diversifying the student body, there are still marginalised groups of young people attempting to enter or are entering university that we know little about, and who risk being overlooked in access and enrolment statistics. Unlike many of the graduates that I interviewed, for Thabo, gaining access to university education was more straightforward than for most. Once he got an offer to study engineering from TUT, his tuition was paid for by the national utilities company that his father worked for as an admin clerk. However, as I demonstrate in Chapter Four of this thesis, benefitting from the initiatives that are discussed above remains a challenge for many Black South Africans from poor and working-class households.

While, as I have argued, the progress that is made in areas like access and enrolment require us to think anew about graduate pathways to employment given the changes in student demographics, it is important to acknowledge that there remain areas for significant improvement in the higher education sector. Participations rates remain concerningly low, especially among Black students. South Africa's higher education participation rate is significantly lower than those of comparable middle-income countries, such as Malaysia and Mexico (DHET, 2021: 5). In 2018, South Africa had a HE participation rate of 23.8% while it stood at 45.1% in Malaysia and 41.5% in Mexico (DHET, 2021: 5). In 2019, only 4.4% of people in South Africa aged 18 to 29 were enrolled in HEIs (Pillay *et al*., 2021: 172). And this was only 4% among Black people and 12% among white people (Pillay *et al*., 2021: 172). Another challenge is that there has been minimal absorption of young people leaving the school system into higher education. The number of learners who are passing their NSC exams with results that make them eligible for university enrolment increased by 7% between 2011 and 2021, while university enrolment has only increased by 2% in the same period (Nxumalo, 2021). This means that young people are passing their matric exams with the expectation that they will be going to university, only to be let down by the reality. And, finally, graduation and success rates for Black students continue to be an issue. Between 2005 and 2021, the undergraduate success rate for Black students increased from 67% to

84% (CHE, 2022: 17; DHET, 2023: 18). However, this remains below undergraduate success rates for white students in the same period, which increased from 79% to 91%, and below the 2021 average success rate which was 85% (CHE, 2022: 17; DHET, 2023: 18). In 2001, a small government grant was introduced to support student learning and success (CHE, 2022: 50). However, it wasn't until 2005 that the funds were used to develop the Extended Programme, which is an integrated foundation year for students who are at risk of dropping out or becoming academically excluded (CHE, 2022: 103). By 2015, nearly all universities offered an Extended Programme, but the results of its effectiveness are mixed: several studies report positive outcomes but data from the DHET suggests that they have had a limited impact on student success (CHE, 2022: 104).

Thabo was one of the students for whom getting to the finish line was a struggle. South Africa has a national policy that promotes work-integrated learning (WIL), such that completing a six-month work placement (or in-service training, as Thabo and others called it) has become compulsory for science and engineering diploma students (DHET, 2013; Ngonda *et al*., 2024). Thabo spent the first two months of his in-service training period struggling to find a placement. But when he finally found a company that he could work with, he was relieved and glad to have the opportunity to gain some work experience:

> "I got an offer to do my in-service training in Johannesburg… the experience I gained there was enormous. We did almost everything: electronics, electrical, mechanical, drawing, programming. The experience was huge. But then, unfortunately, the stipend was a bit low."

Thabo explained that because the stipend was so low, he had to share a one-bedroom apartment with four other people and had to walk about 7.5 kilometres to work and back throughout the duration of his work experience completion:

> "It was a tough time for me – especially the first two or three months. I was really suffering because I didn't get any support from my father's side. And my family— like, I didn't expect much because there's really no money. I needed to make a living with that R2,000[5]. So I joined with a group of four people and I invited them to apply for the same job and they got it, fortunately. We lived in the same apartment. It was R4,000, I think… so I would take out R1,000 from

[5] This is approximately 100 USD. As of April 2024, 1 USD is the equivalent of 18.46 ZAR (the exchange rate was about US$1/R14.50 in 2020 when Thabo was completing this internship).

> the R2,000, and I needed to come up with a plan on how to survive with the grocery. I told them, 'How about we contribute R500 each of us, so that we can get enough groceries for the whole month?' They agreed. But the groceries would be finished around the 20th day, so I would be forced to use my remaining money to buy food. And, on top of that, there's transport. I didn't really use transport. I used to travel to work by foot, going and coming back."

The young men lived in Hillbrow, an inner-city residential neighbourhood of Johannesburg "associated with crime… and ungovernability" (Stadler & Dugmore, 2017: 7). Thabo lived in incessant fear:

> "It was a scary experience because each and every day there were gun shots. I remember this one time when going to work and coming out of the exit/entrance door, there was this guy who was recently robbed in front of the door. Coming out, I see blood on the floor. It was six in the morning… I was shocked. I was like, 'What's happening?'… Every day when I walk out the building, I walk out with the mindset of knowing that it might be the last day."

About four months into their WIL contracts, Thabo's housemates decide to leave. One of his housemates found a job elsewhere, while the rest decided to go back to university to further their studies. Given their cost-sharing arrangement, this left Thabo with no choice but to leave as well. However, Thabo said that the company that they were working for wrote to their university, demanding that they not graduate because they breached the terms of their contract. Fortunately, however, Thabo was allowed to graduate once he told the university what had happened:

> "I explained my situation, that the reason why I cannot go back is because I don't have enough money and I don't know a lot of people. I'm that kind of a person who isn't social with other people. It's not easy for me to make friends. I didn't have any friends except for those people that I lived with who were my classmates."

Thabo's experience is an apt illustration of the extent to which these young people have pushed and battled to get to where they are, which plays a significant role in shaping their experiences in the labour market, an issue I discuss in Chapter Four of this thesis.

It is important to acknowledge that underpinning this state of affairs in the higher education sector in South Africa is a process of neoliberalising higher education institutions that is

being pushed by the government and, in some cases, by university administrations too (Hlatswayo, 2022). The ANC government's contradictory policy orientation on higher education, which, on the one hand, seeks to promote the increase of youth participation in higher education while, on the other hand, divesting from the sector, is explicitly linked to the ANC's embrace of neoliberalism since it took power in 1994 (Cini, 2019: 948). I discuss this theme in more detail in Chapters Two and Four of this thesis.

1.3.2. Elevated and stubborn: the nature of unemployment in South Africa

> "This is a ticking time bomb, and this imminent crisis requires immediate and unwavering attention from all of us" (Deputy President of South Africa, Paul Mashatile, 2023)

Every three months, when Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) publishes the results of the Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS)[6], the public mood is one of anger, disappointment, and frustration as South Africans (re-)realise that the trend continues to be one of worsening unemployment, where young people are hit the hardest. Stats SA (2021) reported that between January and March 2021, which is when I began to interview unemployed graduates, the unemployment rate was 32.5%. The government uses what it calls "the official" rate of unemployment, which counts those who are not employed, are available to work and are *actively* looking for a job (Stats SA, 2021). The expanded rate of unemployment, which includes discouraged jobseekers, stood at 43.2% in the same period (Stats SA, 2021). Among those who were unemployed, 2.1% of them were graduates (by the first quarter (Q1) of 2022, this was 2.8%) (Stats SA, 2022; Mashifana *et al*., 2023). However, the rate of unemployment among graduates was 9.3% (Stats SA, 2021). The unemployment rate among Black graduates remains higher than that of white graduates regardless of the institution attended and the qualification subject (Graham *et al*., 2019: 363; Swanson, 2013).

The "ticking time bomb", as described by current deputy president Paul Mashatile in 2023, is the unemployment rate among young people. In Q1 of 2021, the rate of young people aged

[6] The Quarterly Labour Force Survey (QLFS) is a household-based sample survey conducted by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). It collects information on the labour market activity of individuals aged 15 years and older, and provides the official measures of employment and unemployment.

15 to 34 who were not in employment, education or training (NEET) was 43.6% (Stats SA, 2021). Although many of the latest figures (Q4 2023) report decreases in the unemployment rate, they aren't much more promising. The expanded rate of unemployment was 41.1%, which represented a 3.1 million increase in the number of unemployed South Africans since 2013 (from 8.6 million to 11.7 million people) (Stats SA, 2024). The unemployment rate among graduates increased by 0.3 percentage points to 9.6% (Stats SA, 2024). And at a 44.3% unemployment rate, young people aged 15 – 34 continue to be vulnerable to the labour market (Stats SA, 2024). The majority of the young people making up this group are the "born-frees", the youth born post-1994 for whom South Africa was meant to deliver prosperity.

Unemployment in South Africa is a persistent challenge with "deep historical origins" (Bhorat *et al*., 2021: 674). Economic growth had slowed down significantly by the mid-1970s. And where there was growth, it wasn't accompanied by the level of job creation that was required to absorb the swelling labour force (Seekings & Nattrass., 2005). By the end of the 70s, "unemployed men were crowding rural labour bureaus in unprecedented numbers and queuing outside urban factories" (Seekings & Nattrass., 2005: 166). The collapse of economic growth was caused by internal structural problems, including resource misallocation and wasteful infrastructure development meant to support the implementation of racist policies (i.e.: the Bantustan policy) as well as the international imposition of trade and investment sanctions in response to the apartheid government's brutal attempts to suppress anti-apartheid uprisings (Dollery, 2003). This coincided with, as geographer Cindi Katz (2001: 716) observes, "the now familiar combination of disinvestment in traditional industrial centres and foreign direct investment in areas of lower labour" as production capital began to cross national borders with increasing vigour. Indeed, by the 1980s, South Africa mirrored these global trends as the apartheid government managed to firmly steer the country away from the previously labour-intensive growth path to one that was capital-intensive while, at the same time, pursuing deagrarianisation in the rural areas and implementing tight restrictions on the informal sector (Seekings & Nattrass., 2005; Bhorat *et al*., 2021). This structural shift in the South African economy has resulted in three major trends in employment and the labour market.

Firstly, the capital-intensive growth path has not only limited the number of jobs created, but has also created a "skills twist" caused by a change in the composition of the economy (Francis *et al*., 2021; Heintz & Naidoo, 2021). For much of the twentieth century, agriculture, mining and then manufacturing accounted for half of the value added to the gross domestic product (GDP) and employment – making these labour-intensive primary and secondary sectors the pillars of the economy in the 1960s (Bhorat *et al*., 2021). However, services-related activities in the tertiary sector have since taken over as the largest contributor to economic growth and employment. Between 2000 and 2019, 4.9 million jobs were created, and 89% of them were in the tertiary sector (Bhorat *et al*., 2021: 676). This has been driven mainly by the "powerful but parasitic" financial and business services industry (Bhorat *et al*., 2021; Marais, 2011: 181). This change has been accompanied by increased demands for so-called "high skilled" workers in managerial, professional, "high productivity" occupations (Bhorat *et al*., 2021: 675). But when this takes place in a country where the majority of the population was, for decades, systematically barred from acquiring these skills under apartheid, millions become locked out of the labour market. This has led economists to describe unemployment in South Africa as structural, exhibiting "a skills mismatch" between labour demand and labour supply (Mlatsheni, 2021).

The second development is the increasing casualisation of employment (Branson *et al*., 2019). While the majority of working people are employed on permanent contracts, the biggest year-on-year increase in employment was among those with contracts of unspecified duration followed by those with contracts of limited duration (Stats SA, 2024: 6). The growth of the tertiary sector has also contributed to the growth of low-paid service jobs which cannot be offshored or outsourced to mechanised systems, such as security guards, office and hotel cleaners and personal care occupations (Bhorat *et a*l., 2021). Because these sectors rely heavily on outsourcing and subcontracting, these jobs tend to be precarious, low-paid and unstable (Bhorat *et al*., 2021; Marais, 2011). And because entry into these jobs don't typically require a tertiary education (or much formal education at all), there is a lot of competition for them.

The third development (or, more accurately, the lack thereof) has to do with the informal sector. The existence of a small informal sector (compared to other middle-income countries

and the rest of the continent) alongside high and increasing rates of unemployment has been a persistent puzzle. The size of the informal economy grew significantly between 1995 and 2007, when it then stabilised to about four million workers (Rogan & Skinner, 2021: 763). The evidence shows that the lack of growth in this sector is due to its inability to absorb new entrants (Rogan & Skinner, 2021). During and after the 2008 financial crisis, for example, the informal sector in South Africa showed little ability to absorb the impact of the crisis. It was more affected than the formal sector, and there was very little movement by people into informal self-employment (Rogan & Skinner, 2021). This suggests that the informal economy in South Africa is not a free entry sector, but that there are significant structural constraints and barriers to informal employment (Rogan & Skinner, 2021: 771). In Chapter Five of this thesis, young people's recounting of their attempts to earn money by "starting their own thing" illustrates this. Despite this, in the National Development Plan, which was published in 2012 under former President Jacob Zuma's administration, the informal sector is assigned a large role as an employment creator (NPC, 2012; Rogan & Skinner, 2021). It is projected that the informal sector will create between 1.2 to 2.1 million jobs by 2030 (NPC, 2012). However, the document does not address issues related to barriers to entry or how the informal sector will be supported by the government.

If, based on this information, opportunities for employment are concentrated in "high skill" occupations in the services-focused tertiary sector, then the graduates that I interviewed should be well-positioned to take advantage of them. However, as I (and other authors) have already argued, the benefits of higher education are not shared equally among graduates, with Black (and poor) graduates being disproportionately affected by unemployment (Graham *et al*., 2019; Tivaringe, 2019). And even in cases where young people are able to secure their desired professional jobs, the path that leads there is rarely straightforward. Graduates have to deal with circuitous, non-permanent employment with very little and sometimes no renumeration at all – these are the traumatic realities that are buried in the statistical averages. When Thabo returned from his work-integrated learning placement, he applied for and was offered a learnership from which he earned R6,000 (R4,000 more than the previous placement). However, a learnership is "a structured learning process for gaining theoretical knowledge and practical skills" (merSETA), which is something that he already achieved after completing his WIL module. Determined to progress and to put an end to the

jumping from one kind of internship to another, he applied to multiple internal and external roles. There was a moment of hope, when he was offered a permanent role within the company that he was working for:

> "[The HR manager] said, 'There's an opportunity for you that I want you to take. It's a junior position for people who already graduated... The contract is already made and it just needs to be finalised,' He told me that I'll be getting an increase in pay. I wouldn't be getting a stipend since it will be a junior position… He told me that I would be getting a minimum of R18 000. I got really excited about it… I told my family about the situation. 'Cause the way we were speaking it was like a finalised thing. We were all excited about it because for me it was a new path to paving my career."

However, in the next meeting with this HR manager, the situation had changed:

> "He did call the meeting. We discussed the contract. He said to us he only had bad news. He already signed my name for the place where I was the one who was supposed to sign. He said, 'We made arrangements for a place to stay, for travelling [to East London, where the job was based] and everything.' He said, 'Unfortunately, your pay won't be increased.'… I got disappointed and a bit angry."

After seeking advice from a friend, Thabo told the HR manager that he would not accept the job unless the salary that they had initially indicated was honoured. He said that the HR manager was disappointed because they believed him "to be a nicely behaving person and a person who wouldn't cause drama". He said that the manager wanted to terminate his learnership contract three months before it was supposed to end, but that after he pleaded with them, he was asked not to come back work but that they would continue to pay him for the last three months of his contract. When he went back to searching for jobs, Thabo said that he found the same position that he was offered online. He applied for the job and got an interview, but did not get the job. He suspects it was because the recruiters found out what happened between him and the manager who had originally offered him the job. He also noted that the recruiters told him that the salary for that role was between R20,000 and R35,000, which made him think: "maybe we are being exploited or we were gonna be exploited".

Thabo was heartbroken, and felt a lot of regret. He blamed himself for his current circumstances, and for disappointing his family. Even though he said that he had given up, it

was clear from our conversations and from his social media posts that he worked hard at holding onto a vision of the future in which he was a successful engineer. He reshared, for example, a video in which actors and celebrities like Denzel Washington, Jim Carrey and Steve Harvey talk about the law of attraction. In this video, Steve Harvey motivates an audience by saying "If you see it in your mind, you can hold it in your hand". Thabo also spoke a lot about religion – about how he was able to hold on because he believes in God and knows that his "time is coming". In the chapters that follow, I explore these everyday labours of hoping and keeping on, despite the disappointments and long periods of stasis, as a significant part of how young people experience graduate unemployment.

1.4. The structure of this thesis

In Chapter 2: *Everyday unemployment: the lived experiences of neoliberal change*, I argue that foregrounding "the everyday" allows us to develop an account of graduate unemployment that is comprehensive, nuanced, complex, sensitive and compassionate. I begin this chapter by discussing the neoliberal context within which everyday lives are lived, highlighting the ways in which neoliberal governance and discourse plays a significant role in shaping both the material as well as emotional/social experiences of unemployment in South Africa. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to the development of "everyday unemployment" as a conceptual framework. First, by tracing the work of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Sarah Marie Hall, I provide a brief history of "the everyday" or "everyday life" as analytical concepts in geography. Building on this work, I identify three core features that make up everyday life and, thus, the conceptual framework of everyday unemployment: relationality, temporalities and digital space. I consider each of these features in turn, reviewing the relevant literature. In doing so, I make a conceptual contribution to geographies of everyday life by adding and foregrounding the two features of everyday life which the previous literature was largely silent on (or addressed implicitly or indirectly): the importance of time and the centrality of digital spaces, especially social media, in the everyday.

Chapter 3: *Methodology: researching the everyday* details the methodological process that led to the production of the empirical chapters that follow. This discussion is organised

chronologically, from making data collection plans and back-up plans in my Oxford bedroom during lockdown to leaving Johannesburg with eight months' worth of online data collected during different levels of lockdown. In addition to detailing the practical aspects of this part of the research, such as sampling, recruiting and setting up interviews, I explore the following themes: the effects of the pandemic on the research, creating an open environment through online anonymity and difference, online emotions and the ethics of digital lurking. In this chapter, I make a methodological contribution to the study of the everyday, by showing the ways in which a combination of life history interviews and studying social media activity as an archive of self and of experience can provide rich insights into the core aspects of daily life.

Chapters Four, Five and Six introduce the stories of Nomfundo (22, female, DUT Engineering graduate), Sibahle (27, female, UJ Engineering graduate) and Noxolo (28, female, UJ Public Management graduate): three young women whose life histories and experiences speak directly to the themes that are explored in the respective chapters. Each chapter responds to the three sub-questions that I set out in the introduction of this chapter.

In Chapter 4: *Higher Education in South Africa: grand narratives, realities and ambivalent appraisals*, I show how disjunctures between enduring government discourses about higher education and the reality of young people's higher education experiences contribute to feelings of intense disappointment, which play a significant role in shaping how graduate unemployment is experienced. First, I discuss visions for the future economy developed by successive ANC governments, and the ways in which higher education and young people feature and are constructed within those visions. I then contrast these government expectations and discourses with young people's actual experiences of gaining access to education, and find that they are often limited by the lack of funding, information and the number of places available in universities. Following this, I turn to a discussion about how young people (re-)imagine higher education in the face of its failure to deliver the material and social goods promised by the government and the universities themselves. This, I argue, sets the stage for experiences of unemployment that are shaped by feelings of betrayal, frustration and shame. By bringing together literatures on anticipatory politics (future-making), higher education and the everyday, I bring young people's voices to the fore

in debates about the future of higher education in South Africa and add experiential depth to the literature about access to higher education in South Africa.

Chapter 5: *Labouring towards multiple futures: everyday processes of futuring* investigates how young people cope with and navigate graduate unemployment. First, I ask how, despite repeated disappointment, these young people continuously get up to try again, working towards particular and often changing futures. I find that consuming online motivational content and engaging in religious practice is central to their daily work of keeping going. Secondly, I ask what kinds of futures they imagine in their everyday labours of hoping, and I discuss these under the themes of work, entrepreneurship and migration. This discussion reveals that in imagining these futures, young people have scepticisms about waged work that can be read as resistance to the esteem that this kind of work holds in neoliberal societies, but they also invest in discourses of entrepreneurial responsibility and wealth-making that uphold and celebrate neoliberal discourses. I argue that paying attention to how futures are engaged by these young people in their everyday lives provides nuanced understandings of how they cope with and navigate unemployment in the present. In making this argument, I respond to calls for more diverse and more mundane accounts of future-making by providing detailed accounts of a group of young people's hopes, fears, anticipations and imaginations.

In Chapter 6: *Relationships to time and relationships in time: loafing, kinship and friendships in everyday unemployment*, I bring together work on time-wasting and relationality to explore the ways in which temporalities of unemployment (re)shape relationships that are a core part of everyday life. In the first section of this chapter, using the term "*umahlalela*", I discuss everyday experiences of time as slow, repetitive, and unproductive. And in the second part, I show that, due partly to neoliberal stigmas related to time use, young people's relationships with family and friends contribute to shaping unemployment in significant ways. Here, discussions of digital spaces really come to the fore as I demonstrate the ways in which talking to people online becomes an important source of emotional support during what can be an isolating time. In developing these discussions, I have provided a complex account of family relationships in times of crisis and have contributed to debates about

where and how friendships are formed and maintained (and breakdown) by paying closer attention to the use of online spaces.

And finally, in Chapter 7: *Conclusions: what now?,* I return to a discussion about "the future". I respond to the question, "What now?", as I summarise the findings from the empirical chapters, which are themselves answers to the questions that I have presented in this chapter. I highlight the various contributions that I have made to geographical (and other) scholarship on time, relationality, youth, labour and higher education, and I pose some questions that provide directions for further research.

2 Everyday unemployment: the lived experiences of neoliberal change

2.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I detail the conceptual framework that I use to understand the experiences of Black, youth graduate unemployment in South Africa. I use the concept of "everyday unemployment" to provide nuanced and sensitive understandings of young people's day-to-day experiences of unemployment. I argue that the key to understanding everyday unemployment is to pay attention to three key elements of everyday life: relationality, which helps us to understand the ways in which relationships that are core to everyday life both shape and are shaped by unemployment; temporality, where I consider the ways in which the future and the problem of overabundant time are significant to experiences of unemployment; and digital space, where I highlight the ways in which "the digital" has come to permeate everyday life and, thus, shapes graduate youth unemployment in important ways.

I begin this chapter by discussing the ANC government's embrace of neoliberalism during the negotiations for democracy. As the chapter will show, not only has neoliberal economic governance aggravated the unemployment crisis, but neoliberalism (as an ideology) also upholds values that shape how people respond to unemployment while also affecting how they feel about their circumstances. The sections that follow ask what constitutes everyday life and then considers each core component of everyday life (relationality, temporalities, digital space) to create an analytical framework that allows us to fully appreciate how unemployment is lived and felt in the everyday lives of young South Africans.

2.2. Vuk'uzenzele: from radical promises to neoliberal embrace

> "For all the fears that resentful ANC socialists would confiscate wealth, the new breed shares the same capitalist aspirations as the old." (The Economist, 1996)

From 26 to 28 April 1994, millions of Black South Africans cast their vote in the country's first free and fair elections. They stood for hours, under the autumn sun, in queues that stretched kilometres to ensure that their voices were counted. The days at the ballots were emotionally charged. But it was euphoria and optimism, not fear, that were the dominant emotions at the voting booths. The optimism stemmed, at least in part, from the promises

made by the African National Congress (ANC), who won the election. However, thirty years later, many of the socio-economic promises made by the ANC remain unfulfilled – which, as the quote at the beginning of this section shows, was approvingly noted by 'The Economist' in the mid-1990s (Saul & Bond, 2014: 139). The ANC abandoned the radical, emancipatory agenda of the 1955 Freedom Charter and, according to Saul & Bond (2014: 130), the "mildly more left-leaning" 1994 Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) for a neoliberal approach to development which, especially for Black workers, reflects more continuities with apartheid South Africa's form of racial capitalism than change (Bond, 2000; Hirsch *et al*., 2021; Saul & Bond, 2014).

In 1955, the Freedom Charter was unanimously adopted at a "Congress of the People" held in Kliptown, a township near Johannesburg (Congress of the People, 1955). The Congress was attended by almost 3000 delegates from across South Africa, and was convened by the ANC together with the South African Indian Congress, the South African Coloured People's Organization and the Congress of Democrats – organisations which were soon after effectively banned by the apartheid state until 1990 (Congress of the People, 1955). The Freedom Charter lays out a vision for a socialist-democratic South Africa, demanding, for example, that (Congress of the People, 1955):

> "The rights of the people shall be the same, regardless of race, colour or sex;"
>
> "The people shall share in the country's wealth!"
>
> "There shall be work and security!"
>
> "Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children;"

In 1994, the ANC continued to build on this five-page historic document to develop the Reconstruction and Development Programme, which served as the party's election manifesto and its most substantive set of campaign promises. Embedded within the document were initiatives that could be considered socialist reforms (Bond, 2000). For example, the RDP calls for "increasing the public sector in strategic areas through, for example, nationalisation" as well as electrifying all homes by cross-subsidising the provision of power from rich to poor customers (the RDP in Bond, 2000: 90 - 91). Ultimately, however, the progressive sections of the RDP were not adopted as policy or implemented and were, in

fact, contradicted in large measure by the ANC government's embrace of neoliberalism in its discourses, development policy and management of the economy (Bond, 2000: 115). This is an important structural shift that has contributed to the contemporary form of economic and social crisis in South Africa, with young, Black people feeling the brunt of it in their everyday lives.

In academic enquiry, the term 'neoliberalism' is widely acknowledged as multi-dimension and even contentious by various scholars (i.e.: Ferguson, 2009; Venugopal, 2015). While the use of the term has expanded rapidly over the last twenty years, especially across disciplines like anthropology, sociology and geography, there remains little consensus about what it refers to exactly. In geography, David Harvey's work has been particularly influential in advancing research on the spatial dimensions of neoliberalism and its impacts on urban, regional and global landscapes (Anderson, 2016: 737). He has advanced a structuralist understanding of neoliberalism, which he defines as:

> "…a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can be best achieved by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized [sic] by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade." (Harvey, 2005: 2)

The role of governments, argues Harvey (2005), is to create and preserve those institutional frameworks that are appropriate for such practices. In an African context, the term immediately brings to mind the Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) that were forced on African states in the 1980s by the Bretton Woods Institutions. Generally, the Programmes entailed macroeconomic policy reforms that focused on "removing tariffs, deregulating currency markets, and removing the state from production and distribution (via dismantling of state market boards and parastatals)" (Ferguson, 2009: 172). There is literature (i.e.: Chang, 2015) which defines neoliberalism simply as a set of policies and development programmes, such as those implemented as part of the SAPs, which generally call for deregulation, liberalisation and privatisation. However, an accurate understanding of neoliberalism has to reflect the fact that it refers to more than a particular set of policy choices. Several scholars (i.e.:, Fine & Saad-Filho, 2017; Ganti, 2014; Holborow, 2012; Venugopal, 2015) provide comprehensive and nuanced summaries of the multiple ways in which neoliberalism has most commonly been understood and defined in academic work.

For my own discussion on contemporary South Africa, I adopt Springer's (2012) understanding of neoliberalism as a particular discourse. He rejects the "false dichotomy" between top-down Marxist and bottom-up Foucauldian approaches by arguing for a discourse-based account which conceptualises neoliberalism as a "mutable, inconsistent, and variegated process that circulates through the discourses it constructs, justifies, and defends" (Springer, 2012: 135). Springer (2012) also acknowledges that in privileging discourse, there is a risk of disregarding neoliberalism's materiality. However, he argues that under this approach, "materiality and discourse become integral, where one cannot exist without the other" because to analyse neoliberalism in this way means to critically understand its material composition in different objects, institutional regimes, practices, subjectivities and dispositions (Springer, 2012: 143; Phelan, 2014).

It is clear, when one looks at key policies, programmes and the discourses circulated through key documents and speeches, that the post-apartheid political elite has embraced (or, as some have argued, has been engulfed by) global neoliberalism. Work by Bond (2000), Saul & Bond (2014) and Marais (2011) provides a useful overview of how and why the neoliberal transition happened, and all of the actors that were involved in this process. They argue that the embrace of neoliberalism was firmly solidified by the adoption of the 1996 Growth, Employment and Redistribution (GEAR) plan. And from GEAR to the New Growth Path (2010) to the current National Development Plan (2013-30), the ANC has maintained a steadfast belief in neoliberal principles for development. Ferguson (2009; 2015) and Seekings & Nattrass (2015) point out that even within this neoliberal landscape, there are notable progressive initiatives that have been implemented by the ANC. As an example, Ferguson (2009; 2015) points to the wide-reaching social grants system, which benefits nearly 30 million people in South Africa today (Rosenberg *et al*., 2024). Of course, as Anderson (2016) and other authors (Springer, 2012; Marais, 2011) stress, neoliberalism is never complete - it "is not a singular, coherent entity… new hybrids are formed as neoliberal styles of reasoning and techniques encounter diverse political-economic forms and logics of governing" (Anderson, 2016: 735). In the case of the ANC and South Africa, Zulu (2022) also adds that the extent to which the state can attempt to implement "full neoliberalism" is constrained by both the oppressive and liberatory histories of the apartheid state and the ANC. However, even the progressive elements of the neoliberal policies, like the grants, are

constrained by neoliberal thinking and discourse. As Fouksman (2015: 289) mentions, the grants system is still "explicitly workfarist", and based on the belief that waged work and entrepreneurial zeal should be the basis of welfare, so that only the most deserving poor (the elderly, disabled and the very young) can claim dependence on the state. This changed in 2020 when young people were eligible to receive the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant, which was introduced to support those hardest hit by the pandemic. Grantees can only claim R350 a month for a maximum of three months, after which an extension "may be granted in exceptional cases" (SASSA, 2024)[7]. During the 2022 State of the Nation Address, President Ramaphosa announced that the SRD grant programme would be extended for at least another year, but also had the following to say about how people could use the money (South African Government, 2022):

> "Since the onset of COVID-19, the Social Relief of Distress Grant has provided support to more than 10 million unemployed people who were most vulnerable to the impact of the pandemic. Some people used that money to start businesses. Mr Thando Makhubu from Soweto received the R350 grant for seven months last year, and saved it to open an ice-cream store that employs four people. Mr Lindokuhle Msomi, an unemployed TV producer from KwaMashu Hostel, saved the R350 grant for nine months to start a fast-food stall and support his family."

What the president says here is representative of the spirit and literal meaning of the term '*vuk'uzenzele*', which can be translated into a call to "get up and do it yourself". The state positions itself as a provider of opportunities (no matter how small and unrealistic), but emphasis is placed on the ability of individuals to show the pluck, grit and determination to make the most of these opportunities. The ability to do so is celebrated by the president in parliament, while the failure to successfully turn these opportunities into long-term success is constructed as a personal, moral failing. By highlighting this display of ingenuity and proactiveness, Ramaphosa seeks to promote subjectivities of responsibility and self-discipline among citizens, and especially among young people.

These neoliberal narratives don't just come from the state, and nor are they simply internalised wholesale by young people. Unemployed graduates encounter neoliberal

[7] There has been a lot of confusion, debate and activism regarding whether or not the grant should be permanent (Howson, 2022).

discourses that promote individual responsibility, resilience and entrepreneurship in popular culture, movies and in self-help books written by their favourite celebrities and entrepreneurs. Neoliberal discourse and policy, however, is variously affirmed, subverted and internalised or resisted by individuals who draw on more than one discourse to frame how they understand their circumstances. Studies which examine educated unemployment in Kenya (Mwaura, 2017), Egypt (Pettit, 2018) and India (Jeffrey *et al*., 2008) suggest it was often feelings of personal responsibility and self-critique that dominated these young people's experience, instead of anger towards structural inequalities. Research by Porter *et al*. (2018) and Fouksman (2020) also shows, for example, how people insist that they prefer receiving work opportunities from the government over "handouts". In my own research, however, I found that the young people that I interviewed were both very critical of the government and the structural barriers that they faced, with some of them drawing on discourses that they would have encountered during the Fees Must Fall protests across the university campuses that they attended. But they also blamed themselves, while striving to portray themselves as resourceful, flexible, innovative – as good neoliberal subjects. Neoliberal discourses and subjectivities find ways to exist alongside scepticism and complaint (Pettit, 2018).

Whether they resisted or internalised particular neoliberal ethos, its consequences have had and continue to have a tremendous impact on their and other people's lives, life chances, social relationships and ways of inhabiting the world. In the years following the adoption and implementation of GEAR in South Africa, the levels of poverty and inequality increased as tariff cuts destroyed the textile and agricultural sectors, leading to the loss of a million formal sector jobs by 2001 (Saul & Bond, 2014: 128). More than twenty years later, young people continue to be disproportionately affected by the continuing lack of jobs - both materially and discursively. And as Holdsworth (2017) and Pettit (2019) argue, it is important to acknowledge emotional and affective implications of this state of affairs for young people. The literature shows that young people in similar situations across the global South (and, increasingly, across the global North) are feeling anxious, depressed, frustrated and plagued by self-doubt (see, for example, Abebe, 2020; Jeffrey *et al*., 2008; Sommers, 2012; Mains, 2011; Pettit, 2018; Mwaura, 2017). Using the concept of "everyday unemployment", which I unpack in the sections that follow, this thesis explores how young graduates experience

unemployment. By doing so, I aim to contribute to the burgeoning ethnographic literature (i.e.: Honwana, 2012; Sommers, 2012; Mains, 2011) on young people in Africa which examines diverse experiences of "waithood" in the wake of neoliberal transformations by bringing innovative perspectives to this broader conversation.

2.3. Constructing the framework: key aspects of everyday unemployment

During the process of designing this research and conducting the initial desk research in preparation for fieldwork, I gravitated towards using Johnson-Hanks' (2002) framework of "vital conjunctures" to conceptualise graduate unemployment as a liminal period of transition for young people. Vital conjunctures, like falling pregnant or graduating from university, are "moments when seemingly established futures are called into question and when actors are called on to manage durations of radical uncertainty" (Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 878). However, as I started to conduct interviews with young people, I was struck by how overwhelming unemployment was for these graduates. Unemployment seemed to pervade practically every aspect of their lives. What became increasingly clear was the incredible toll that it took on them and, often, their relationships. As I show in Chapter Five, considerable time and energy was constantly and routinely invested into coping, strategising and keeping their futures alive. As Masquelier (2013: 482) notes about educated unemployed young men in Niger, "from the moment they awaken until they go to sleep, they are forced to live a diminished existence in which there can be *no time off*" [emphasis added] from their struggles for work and dignity. Unemployment also ruptures what it means to be educated, and contributes to a crisis of identity as a university graduate. As a result, I was eager to develop a conceptual framework that understood graduate unemployment in South Africa as more than just a moment, but as a relational condition that stretches into the past as well as the future. And I am able to achieve this through the use of "everyday unemployment" as a lens.

2.3.1. What exactly is everyday life?

"Everyday life" did not appear as an analytical concept until the 1920s (Skelton, 2017). The works of Henri Lefebvre and Michel de Certeau have been influential in geography – especially in research on urban geographies (Skelton, 2017: 1; Kraftl & Horton, 2013). Based on a critique of modernity and the continued colonial projects of France, Lefebvre (1991)

argued that everyday life was structured by the cyclical rhythms of capital which alienated people "from the true condition of their existence" (Hall, 2019b: 7). He conceptualised everyday life as inherently temporal. de Certeau (1984), on the other hand, was interested in the imaginative and inventive ways in which people "did" and "practiced" everyday life (Skelton, 2017; Hall, 2019b). He argues that everyday life should be understood as a site of resistance against the strategies of powerful authorities (Hall, 2019b: 8; Skelton, 2017). Both theorists shaped Hall's early understanding of and writing about everyday life (Hall, 2019b: 7). But after engaging with critical scholarship which problematises the domination of white, male, meta-theoretical "big boys" in social research, Hall came to craft theories of everyday life in conversation with the work of feminist scholars instead. Feminist geographers have made important contributions to advancing the analysis of the everyday – seeking to keep women visible in the context of fast-paced socio-economic and political changes which tend to hide the social, economic and political contributions of women (Skelton, 2017). Feminist geographers have also highlighted that spaces (public, especially) that seem "normal" and ordinary for some (men, especially), can often be distressing for women and gender minorities (Kraftl, 2013: 190). Drawing on these and other feminist works, Hall (2019a) crafts an understanding of everyday life and austerity in the north of England which foregrounds the relational – a discussion I return to in a later section of this chapter. According to Hall (2019a), austerity in the UK has become (and continues to be) an economic and political norm after the global financial crisis of 2008-09 led to a series of austerity policies being implemented in much of the Anglo-American world and parts of Southern Europe. In response to theorisations of austerity that are based in "a very particular, self-assured political-economic tradition" and have, as a result, led to the lived experiences of economic crisis being overlooked, Hall argues for the importance of research that focuses on the everyday geographical implications of austerity – this is what she has termed "everyday austerity" (Horton *et al*., 2021: 3; Hall, 2019a). This, she goes on to clarify, is about "the impact that contemporary conditions of austerity… have in and on everyday life" (Hall, 2019a: 769).

The scholarly work that I have reviewed so far is based largely on theorisations of everyday life in the global North. Imoh *et al*. (2022) encourage scholars, especially those based on the continent, to conduct more research on the everyday lives of children in Africa. They argue

that much of the literature on children in these contexts overlooks their everyday lives, choosing instead to centre the difficulties and extremes of their existence through research that focuses on HIV/Aids orphans, child labour and street children, for example (Imoh *et al*., 2022: 2). In response to this, they produced a volume of work that concentrates on the "mundanities of the everyday lives of many children, which consists of various forms of learning, play, religious activities, family life and friendships" (Imoh *et al*., 2022: 4). There is work on educated unemployed youth in Africa which doesn't explicitly take everyday life as its conceptual lens, but provides rich portraits of how young people (mostly men) experience and cope with educated unemployment in their day-to-day lives. Pettit's (2019: 723) study on young men in Egypt, for example, provides an account of the "everyday emotional endurance of prolonged precarity" by observing this group of young men as they go about their daily lives: going to their call centre jobs, watching TV, sharing jokes and going to the mall. Similarly, in his ethnography about unemployed young men in Ethiopia, Mains' goal is to enhance accounts of unemployment by going into the spaces that "we often conceive of as being the most hidden and personal" (Mains, 2011: 19). He argues that while it is important to acknowledge and study the uprisings that result from these prolonged periods of youth unemployment, we shouldn't ignore the everyday (Mains, 2011: 3):

> "Eruptions of political violence such as this are certainly important, but they are also episodic. These spectacular events often attract the attention of journalists and academics, and as a result the day-to-day lived realities of youth are ignored. This book examines less visible, but no less important struggles of young men to find work, attain economic independence, and raise a family. These quotidian experiences… are also important in their own right."

The exact definition of everyday life is hard to pin down. This discussion has demonstrated some of the varied ways in which scholars write about and define "the everyday" or "everyday life" (see Kraftl, 2013 for a longer discussion about definitions and theorisations of everyday life). According to Hall (2019a: 772), the everyday represents people's "feelings, experiences, practices and actions". It encompasses "affect and emotions, bodily experiences and practical knowledges, the role played by 'lived' time and space in the constitution of social experience" (Hall, 2019a: 770). In the next section, I build on this by outlining the key dimensions of the concept of "everyday unemployment" in order to provide new ways of thinking about unemployment and experiences of graduate

unemployment in South Africa. There are specific aspects of everyday life that are important to understanding neoliberal unemployment's effects beyond the material and political-economic. In the first aspect, I am guided by Hall (2019b: 29 - 67), who makes a case for thinking relationally about the everyday and everyday life under austerity in the UK. The second aspect to everyday life that I will highlight is temporality. While Hall (2019b: 29) acknowledges that "*time*, place and context are important in shaping what austerity means in different spaces and moments" [emphasis added], the temporal aspect is hardly discussed by Hall (except, perhaps, in the article about Brexit (Hall, 2021)). I argue that time is a central feature of everyday life, and, therefore, I tease out the various ways in which young people experience and relate to time in their everyday lives while unemployed. And, finally, I broaden the concept of "space" to include digital space. What will become clear in the chapters that follow is that the digital, especially social media, has become a key aspect of unemployment in everyday life. I use this conceptualisation of "every unemployment" to understand the experiences of young, unemployed graduates in contemporary SA.

2.3.2. Relationality

In geography, there has been a push for scholars to "think space [as well as place, identity and countless other phenomena] relationally" (Wright *et al*., 2016). The work of Doreen Massey has been key to this. Massey (1991) argues that social relations are vital to geographical understandings of the world, and urges us to understand space "as the product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny" (Massey, 2005: 9). Not only is space constituted by relations, but it is also constitutive of relations – as in, space also plays an essential part in the make-up and dynamics of relations (Wright *et al*., 2016: 459). Building on this, Hall (2019b: 29) outlines a relational approach to everyday life in austerity, where she argues that the key to understanding the complexity of lived austerity is understanding everyday relationships. A closer inspection of geographies of family, friendship and intimate relations (i.e.: the core of significant everyday social relationships), she argues, offers the opportunity to develop nuanced relational understandings of austerity and everyday life (Hall, 2019b: 29). Hall uses the term "relational" to connect two ideas: "the literal sense of social relations and how relational geographies are being reworked by and through austerity", and the spaces that

are produced because of the changes in the "socio-material constitution of everyday life" (including the power, inequality and difference in those space) (Hall, 2019b: 34).

I, similarly, incorporate a relational lens to understand unemployment in the everyday lives of young women and men. Unemployment is not just about the lack of a job and an income – it's a condition that is intertwined with everyday life and the relationships that are grounded in everyday life. A relational approach illustrates how unemployment operates in everyday life. On the one hand, unemployment can (re)constitute these relationships (for better or for worse) while, on the other hand, these relationships also shape how people experience and respond to unemployment. I apply this relational thinking throughout the thesis to understand how unemployment is experienced in everyday life. For example, in Chapter Four, I consider the ways in which decision-making, about higher education and career paths, is a relational process. And in Chapter Six, I show how ideas of family, generation and social reproduction are in flux due to the circumstances that these young people are in. There are several studies located in Africa, that I aim to build on, which highlight the significance of relationality/relations in understanding unemployment. Drawing on research conducted in Madina, a suburb of Accra, Ghana, Langevang and Gough (2009) show that young people's access to the resources that they need for their day-to-day living is gained through networks and social relations of friends, relatives, neighbours etc., and that moving around the city is crucial for creating and sustaining these social relations. Similarly, Masquelier (2013) shows how young men in Niger not only get material support from friends and family, but also spend their days hanging out in *fadas* (conversation groups) that offer emotional support and conviviality which makes their days bearable. And in Mains' (2011) work with young people in Ethiopia, he emphasises that both their refusal to take up low-status jobs and their frustrations with non-progress in everyday life should be understood as relational – where occupational stigma plays a huge role and making progress (i.e.: successfully becoming an adult) is constructed as a change from being a dependent to being a provider for one's family and the community. My research, which also, unlike this literature, incorporates digital accounts of relationality, challenges accounts (i.e.: Langevang & Gough, 2009: 747) which claim that social relations have to be practised through "moments of [physical] co-presence" in order for them to be intimate, meaningful; or long-lasting.

2.3.3. Temporalities of everyday unemployment

Temporalities – as in, people's understandings and lived experiences of time – are crucial for thinking about everyday experiences of graduate unemployment in South Africa. Jeffrey (2010) notes that an interesting aspect of scholarly work on youth unemployment was that it frequently mentioned young men's anxieties about time. Temporalities are made up of lived time, and can be defined as "a specific experience of time that is structured in specific political and economic contexts" (Sharma, 2014: 9). According to Scott (2009: 113), there are five dimensions of time that shape our experience it:

> "… periodicity (or rhythm), tempo (pace), synchronisation (the coordination of tasks), duration (how long things take) and sequence (the order in which we do things). Put together, these dimensions constitute the temporal rhythms of daily life."

Unemployment is experienced within environments that are dominated by Western, modern, industrial capitalist notions of time, which promote specific logics and norms in relation to these dimensions that shape our experience of time. Time, according to modernist notions, is neutral, linear and chronological, and leads to a predictable future (probably by way of statistical modelling and calculations) (Nielsen, 2021; Holloway *et al*., 2019). For young people, the dominance of this interpretation of time has meant the following (Jeffrey, 2010: 13):

> "… a formalization [sic] of how societies imagined people should move through their biological lives and increased emphasis placed on distinct life "stages" (Johnson-Hanks 2002). Particular models of how social lives should be mapped onto chronological time became enshrined in new laws and public institutions (Cole and Durham 2008: 6): childhood, youth, adulthood and old age were institutionalized [sic] as distinct phases of life… In addition, the notion of school trajectories and adult (usually male) working careers became ubiquitous…"

Geographers and other scholars (Hall, 2019a; Johnson-Hanks, 2002; Stirling, 2022) have critiqued these ideas of lifecourse and transition, arguing that in reality, people's trajectories are non-linear. They consist of changing periods of moving forward, moving backward, getting off track or standing still (Nielsen, 2021). Mains (2011) argues that because the young men in his study are taught, through their engagement with formal education, to continuously expect linear, step-by-step progress, they become frustrated by the lack of any

progress at all. Similarly, despite lived trajectories being non-linear, the dominant temporal logics imposed by Western modernity are still important milestones through which many young people measure their success and their personal worth. These discourses of linear time, therefore, can lead to feelings of being a "temporal outsider" as people compare their circumstances to where they should be according to prevailing age norms about when one should have a job, buy a house and start a family, for example (Nielsen, 2021: 191). They also feel out of sync with peers who have achieved these milestones. For Jeffrey (2010: 13), this dominance of linear time under modernity "exert[s] a symbolic violence" on those who are unable to progress through these life stages – causing stress, frustration, anxiety and feelings of worthlessness.

We can say, then, that for young people, unemployment is experienced as a relational problem of time in their everyday lives. Ideally, for young people, the temporality of everyday life would combine recurrence (which provides stability) with a linear path towards their desired and hoped for futures (Masquelier, 2013). But the temporal experience of unemployment is characterised by a sense of drag and delay (Pettit, 2018; 2019), cyclicality (Masquelier, 2013) and emptiness and abundance (Jeffrey, 2010) – far from the "time squeeze" (the perception of not having enough time) (Scott, 2009) or the "space-time compression" (Harvey, 1990: 420) emphasised in literature that focuses on experiences of modern capitalist time in the global North. Under these circumstances, young people devise and attempt to implement temporal strategies in response to unemployment. At the same time, the qualities of time, felt as dragging and repetitive, have a significant effect on their everyday wellbeing. In this thesis, I am interested in developing two aspects of youth temporalities to conceptualise and develop a nuanced account of everyday unemployment: futuring and problems of excessive time.

Ordinary futuring

An aspect of Johnson-Hanks' work that still resonates with my findings is the emphasis on the future. Vital conjunctures are "experiential knots during which potential futures are under debate and up for grabs" (Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 872). During this time, and depending on the specific conjuncture, people might ask themselves questions like: "Will I find a job in my field of study?", "Will a master's degree improve my chances of finding

work?" These potential futures, which Johnson-Hanks calls "the horizons of the conjuncture", orient and motivate the forms of action that researchers observe and inquire about in the present (Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 872). And the analysis of vital conjunctures, therefore, rests on understanding what futures are imagined, hoped for or feared (Johnson-Hanks, 2002: 872). Building on this, I draw on literature in geography and anthropology to explore the ways in which futures, everyday lives, relations and unemployment are connected.

There has been growing interest in futures and futurity in human geography research (Bunnell *et al*., 2018). However, this work has tended to focus on the macro-scale, the grand narratives contained in ten-year national development plans and in threatening UN projections based on calculations and technoscientific probability (van Wolputte *et al*., 2022; Bunnell *et al*., 2018; Bröckling *et al*., 2016). And in these narratives, youth are constructed as central to the achievement of a prosperous nation, often described as vanguards. Take, for example, the statement that was made by deputy president Paul Mashatile at the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) Investment Roundtable (2023) (South African Government, 2023):

> "If, as a nation, we do not make a concerted effort to invest in the growth of our human capital, and train our young people to acquire more marketable skills, we will not be able to create a nation that is competitive relative to the rest of the world."

Several scholars, including Bunnell *et al*. (2018), van Wolputte *et al*. (2022) and Jeffrey & Dyson (2021), highlight that what's missing from much of the existing futures scholarship is how futures are engaged by ordinary people in their ordinary lives. There are few scholars, including the three cited here as having raised the critique, that have, either explicitly or implicitly, contributed to developing academic work on everyday futures and future-making. The piece by van Wolputte *et al*. (2022: 2) is an introduction to *African Futures*: a book of "splinters and snippets, work in progress and food for thought" about futuring in and from Africa. The authors insist on using the gerund: "futuring". Not "the future" and not even "futures" because (van Wolputte *et al*., 2022: 3):

> "… the plural ('futures') implies downscaling, honing in on the lived experiences of social actors, doing justice to the variety and heterogeneity of life on the African continent. Yet, this still does not suffice, for it presupposes foreseeable paths and trajectories… [but] people are making their futures today."

Indeed, as the accounts in this thesis will demonstrate, these futures are not rigid. They are constantly (re)shaped by past and present experiences, and through everyday contact with global flows of culture, crises and relations which have the potential to generate new possibilities. And what people conceive of as being possible could be (re)-constituted as much through engagements with the imaginary as with the "real world". In the same book, I found the essay by Schulz (2022), on religious practice and/as future-making, useful for contextualising the constant references that the research participants made to God when talking about their hopes for their futures. I address this more comprehensively in Chapter Five. Bunnell *et al*. (2018: 35) respond to Appadurai's call for "for a more people-centred and 'democratic' consideration to future-making" by investigating the formation of aspirations in urban Asia. To avoid conceptualisations of future-making that might suggest that people act toward a fixed destination, the authors, like van Wolputte *et al*. (2022), prefer to use the term "prospect" (Bunnell *et al*., 2018: 37):

> "… where prospect is operative both as a noun (suggesting a mental image of the future) and a verb (suggesting practices of seeking, searching – and the possibility of finding opportunities not only different from *a priori* imaginings but beyond what had previously even been imaginable or deemed possible)."

Because aside from the obstacles and constraints that people face along the way (Bunnell *et al*., 2018: 40):

> "… future-oriented practices continually give rise to new imaginings and necessitate revised calculations in a recursive spatiotemporal process that is human life itself."

The authors make three more contributions that are especially useful for my discussion on graduate unemployment in everyday life. First, like several other scholars (i.e.: Steuer's (2017) edited collection; van Lenan, 2021; Cole & Durham, 2008), the authors argue that the future can be known in the present. And that in particular, there are three ways in which the present is bound up with the future (Bunnell *et al*., 2018: 39):

a) Imagination: possible futures are made present through mental pictures, or imaginary temporal excursions (see also Bryant & Knight, 2019)
b) Likelihood and possibility: futures are "rendered amenable to calculation and strategic action in relation to available resources, social capital"
c) Every practices, performances and events

Regarding a), for example, Mains (2011) shows how activities like chewing khat[8] and watching international films constituted the processes through which young men in Ethiopia created fantasies about migration and (re)constructed new limits and possibilities for their futures. He argues that the daily construction of these fantasies leads young men to accept long term unemployment because they anticipated an eventual opportunity to leave Ethiopia and find success abroad (Mains, 2011). Imagined futures are just as important as the present and the past in shaping young people's livelihood and coping strategies because, as Jeffrey *et al*. (2008: 67) argues, "they may seek support and approval not for what they are, but who they promise to become".

The second key contribution made is stressing that aspirations are not just about individual wants and choices because aspirations are developed and nurtured "within a wider system of ideas about the good life, health, and happiness, aspirations are also (collective) social and cultural matters" (Bunnell *et al*., 2018: 37). Abebe (2020) stresses that young people's visions of particular futures (in Oromia, Ethiopia) are carved out in the context of systemic inequality and widespread unemployment owing to the neoliberal economic orthodoxy that produces precarious lives. And third, while it is important to counter grand narratives about "the future" with research about everyday futures, the latter cannot be done in isolation from the former. Chapter Four of this thesis, in particular, shows how national narratives about (the future of) higher education and the rise of the global knowledge economy sit (uncomfortably) alongside young people's own experiences and futuring.

Working with youth from two cities in Ireland (Cork and Dublin), van Lanen's (2021) research stresses the importance of young people's imagined futures for understanding their everyday geographies, because the futures that they imagine influence how they prepare, in the present, for that future. She argues that the effects of neoliberalism (austerity, in particular) shape how these young people anticipate and imagine specific futures, and how

[8] Khat is a stimulant drug that is part of some social traditions in parts of Africa and the Middle East.

they imagine their lives. By revealing the kinds of austere futures that young people anticipate, we can better understand their current experiences and their coping strategies. van Lanen (2021) also highlights the role that the past plays in constructing these experience. She explains that young people's experiences (and the experiences of older generations in their families) of austerity and the consequences of other neoliberal crises inform their present strategies and future imaginaries. Moreover, traditional models of adulthood, based largely on transitioning from work to marriage to parenthood, are no longer available but continue to be the standard against which youth today evaluate their attempts to transition to adulthood. van Lanen (2021: 2037) identifies four relationships that individuals hold to their future, which she uses to explore the anticipated futures of the youth in her study: anticipating austerity (induces stress), adapting to austerity, getting on with life and accepting austerity (learning how to live with it). In her research, van Lanen (2021) uses these categories to demonstrate the variety of relationships to the future that people can hold. However, I show that one young person can hold all of these relationships to the future, often oscillating between all four categories at different times throughout their lives, throughout the day, and even within the space of an hour-long research interview.

The research that I have reviewed here demonstrates the value of investigating futures in order to understand everyday unemployment. By examining the practices and actions that young people engage in, by paying attention to and taking seriously the imaginations that they articulate, we can discern potential futures and highlight the role of young people in creating futures. And by asking what it is that they hope for and anticipate, are fearful of and are avoiding, we can develop nuanced understandings of their present actions, strategies for coping and their emotions. This is also crucial for formulating policies and programmes that can provide effective and meaningful support for young people.

Trying to trick time

Young people's concerns about the future are exacerbated by the excessive amount of time that they have in their day-to-day lives. Unemployment can strip people of temporal structure because they don't (and don't have the opportunity to) follow the conventions of the rhythms of the working day (Scott, 2009). Therefore, time in everyday life can be

experienced as passing extremely slow, dragging and even inescapable. There are several studies which explore this experience of time among young men, and the strategies that they use to combat the feelings of ennui, restlessness and the torture of "thinking too much" (about the future). In Niger, Masquelier (2013) hangs out with young men who join "f*adas*" (conversation groups) because they have too much time on their hands. In these groups, young men spend their days listening to music, playing card games and making new friends (or reinforcing old friendships). But most importantly, they made tea. Masquelier (2013: 472) explains that "the lengthy preparation and consumption of tea not only participates in efforts to imbue life with future-oriented expectations but also constitutes a form of time management". In the absence of other activities that punctuate daily life (like waged work), making and drinking tea turns into an important event, allowing the young men to create meaningful temporalities and reconstitute their relationship to the future. In Senegal, young unemployed men are engaged in a very similar kind of time management, where drinking tea has become an urban aesthetic and a popular way to "kill time" among young men (Ralph, 2008). The process for making the tea can take as much as thirty minutes, and, as Ralph (2008: 6) notes, there are often at least three to four rounds of tea shared between men throughout the day. In Ethiopia, the overabundance of time is similarly experienced as a source of stress and anxiety for young men who spent a lot of that time chewing khat and watching videos or films as temporary solution to this problem (Mains, 2011). These practices have become an important coping mechanism in the face of economic crisis. They allow the young men to use up their time but also, as Masquelier (2013) argues, they represent an opportunity for young men to reposition themselves in relation to the future. Jeffrey (2010), likewise, explores the masculine cultures of "timepass" among young men in India who need to pass time in new ways in the face of their joblessness.

What these young men are engaged in is what Bryant & Knight (2019: 14) call "time-tricking", which refers to "the different ways in which people individually and collectively attempt to modify, mangle, bend, distort, speed up or slow down or structure the times they are living in". Or what Nielsen *et al*. (2021: 178) describes as temporal agency: a person's attempt to control the passing of time. The person might want to control or change the timing or duration of events, so that time feels short or long. Unemployed

youth often seek to shorten their days. My own research shares young people's narratives of their experience of time in their daily lives using a word that some young people in the interviews used to describe themselves: being "*umahlalela*" (i.e.: a loafer). I also discuss how young people cope with this spatio-temporally specific experience of time.

2.3.4. Chronically online

"Chronically online" is a term used in popular online discourse to describe someone who spends a significant amount of time online, "to the point where their personality revolves around internet memes, culture and slang" or to the point that their sense of reality becomes skewed (Al-Heeti, 2021). While this is a term that is meant to poke fun at mostly white, North American, frivolous uses of the social media, it is true that digital space has become an integral part of everyday life, with people spending hours online for entertainment, educational, work or other purposes. Therefore, to attempt to study graduate unemployment in everyday life without considering the ways in which digital technologies and online platforms shape and are shaped by the experience of unemployment would be to paint a picture of young people's experiences of unemployment that is incomplete.

Multiple studies show that, in Africa, the primary route through which young people access the internet is through mobile phones. The growth in the use of the internet among young Africans has been facilitated by the growing supply of low- to mid-cost smartphone devices (Porter *et al*., 2018) as well as the rapid growth of mobile internet, which allows people to be connected to the internet without being dependent on fixed broadband access (Bosch, 2021: 3). In South Africa, smartphone penetration surpassed 90% in 2019 – a sharp increase from about 44% in 2016 (Mzekandaba, 2020). Mobile phones have, thus, become a prominent feature of everyday lives, where youth are constructed as the vanguards of phone and internet adoption and use. This rapid uptake of mobile digital technologies is taking place in the context of digital-growth-focused narratives for development. In Rwanda, for example, the government has invested heavily in information and communication technologies (ICTs), and sees them as the key to achieving "Singaporean-style service economy" development (Grant, 2019). Similarly, the South African government has

positioned national participation in the global fourth industrial revolution and the knowledge economy as the cornerstone of its development agenda.

The rapid growth in young people's use of phones, the internet and especially social media has led to a growing body of research exploring how these digital technologies intersect with the lives of young people. However, I have found that majority of the accounts about Africa are focused either on young people's political activities online (where popular themes include the use of Twitter in movements like the Arab Spring in MENA, 'Fees Must Fall' and 'Rhodes Must Fall' in South Africa and the use of social media during the 'End SARS' protests in Nigeria) or they are focused on the potential of and challenges to livelihood generation (with a particular focus on the gig economy) (for example: Luescher *et al.*, 2016; Tudoroiu, 2014; Uwalaka, 2022). While, for my research, the importance of using phones and the internet to attempt to forge a livelihood remains important, this existing work does leave out the more mundane and everyday ways that young people in (South) Africa use digital technologies to navigate their everyday lives as unemployed young graduates. There are a few studies that have begun to address this gap. Bosch (2021), for example, investigates the ways that people integrate technologies into their everyday routines. In each chapter, she focuses on a different app (Strava, Tinder, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) to explore how it intersects with different aspects of everyday life. The majority of the book has a political focus, addressing themes such as cultural citizenship, the #FeesMustFall and #ZumaMustFall campaigns as well as conversations about race on Twitter (Bosch, 2021). But the first three chapters explore how identities are constructed through wearable technologies that log running data, how hashtags on Instagram are used to shape ideas about offline space through online representation, and to argue that use of the dating app Tinder does not erode traditional ideals of commitment and romantic love (Bosch, 2021). In their study of the Hindu political right's use of social media in creating new "party-political intimacies", Williams *et al*. (2022: 306) investigate how WhatsApp has become central to everyday "political talk" in India. I add to this literature by considering more of the mundane and ordinary, but also looking more closely at how LinkedIn contributes to shaping everyday lives of unemployment. In Rwanda, Grant (2019) considers how local Kinyarwanda-language entertainment websites create spaces of debate, aspiration and self-making, as well as providing insights into how concepts like "national development" as well as everyday issues

are discussed and understood by young people. An aspect of this work that is especially relevant to my own study is the ways in which, as Grant (2019) explains, these websites combine the local and the global and in doing so facilitate (new) imaginations of possible lives (especially outside of Rwanda). Additionally, although work by Stevens *et al*. (2016) is based on the role of social media in the lives of young people in the U.S., the discussion about the importance of digital spaces/social media for young people resonates with what young people are experiencing in South Africa. The authors argue that young people living in disadvantaged neighbourhoods experience their challenges as a problem of space. Because of systemic disinvestment in their cities, high concentrations of poverty, the lack of employment opportunities and the ubiquity of violence, young people prefer to spend the overwhelming majority of their time indoors (Stevens *et al*., 2016). As a result, the digital world becomes an important place to connect with their peers and to create or sustain a social world. In the absence of third spaces (like coffee shops, community centres, libraries), social media sites potentially serve as a sort of third space for these young people. Although the contexts are different, I similarly found that young people in my study spent a significant amount of time indoors and used social media and other digital platforms to overcome social isolation, find refuge from feelings of shame and from tense relations with parents and to distract them from the abundance of time that is discussed above. However, Stevens *et al*. (2016) also found that rather than social media addressing this problem of space among the young people whose everyday lives they study in the U.S., social media appeared to amplify it. In my own research, I found that sites like LinkedIn and WhatsApp largely figured as positive spaces in the everyday lives of unemployed graduates in South Africa. However, of course, young people didn't always have positive experiences on all social media platforms all of the time. The final two studies that I consider here, by Amankwaa *et al*. (2020) and Porter *et al.* (2018), focus on the role of the mobile phone in the lives of young people in Ghana (Amankwaa *et al*., 2020) and in Ghana, Malawi and South Africa (Porter *et al*., 2018). While Amankwaa *et al*. (2020: 371) argue that mobile phones are "increasingly becoming an important asset that is used by young people to gauge, create and navigate income-generating opportunities", Porter *et al.* (2018: 555) argue that their "findings suggest that the extent to which the mobile phone can support and sustain real [livelihood] improvement in young lives is depressingly finite" – especially for South Africa, while they provided slightly more opportunities for youth in Ghana. Throughout this thesis, I

engage with these literatures, building on them by providing empirical evidence from South Africa, on how the digital features in the lives of unemployed graduates as they attempt to navigate their ways out precarious positions.

2.4. Conclusion

In order to understand young people's experiences of graduate unemployment, I adopt a temporal perspective to relational geographies of unemployment, while also highlighting the role of the digital in shaping experiences in everyday life. This chapter has laid the groundwork for a comprehensive understanding of Black, youth graduate unemployment in South Africa through the lens of everyday unemployment. In the chapters that follow, I use this framework to explore the intricate and intimate aspects of young people's day-to-day experiences of unemployment, emphasising relationality, temporalities and digital space in shaping these experiences.

The starting point for this chapter was tracing the roots of the unemployment crisis in the ANC's adoption of neoliberalism. However, this is not just a backdrop. Neoliberal policy and discourse permeates all aspects of everyday life, having significant material as well as affective consequences. By highlighting the connections between neoliberalism, everyday life and unemployment, I hope to contribute a well-rounded perspective of the challenges faced by young people in contemporary South Africa. The next chapter outlines the methodological process that went into producing this research project.

3 Methodology: researching the everyday

3.1. Introduction

This chapter details the story of the eight months of fieldwork that went into the creation of the three empirical chapters that follow. The chapter will proceed chronologically, taking the reader through the steps that led me to the findings that I discuss next. It will begin by detailing the research design process and the ways in which the pandemic compelled me to make changes to the methods that I had intended to use. The next section focuses on my time in the field. I discuss the times that I had to spend waiting and the times I had to act quickly in order to seize an opportunity that could disappear as rapidly as it appeared. I reflect briefly on entering the domain of digital research as a "newbie" during fieldwork. And then I delve into the particularities of recruiting participants, interviewing them and also studying their online presence as an archive. The final two sections of the chapter turn to data analysis and ethical issues. In particular, I detail the struggles that I faced in attempts to analyse the multi-media LinkedIn data that I collected and explore the ethical tensions created by using and presenting data that may technically be considered public in the face of a more complex reality.

In the book titled *Mundane Methods*, Holmes & Hall (2020: 3) note that while academic work and literature on everyday lives is growing, the methods continue to lag behind and, as a result, there are little to no resources from which scholars can learn from about approaches for studying the everyday. I argue that the combination of life history interviews and studying digital posts as personal archives provides rich data for understanding the everyday. Throughout this chapter, I aim to present a purposeful and candid account of the research process as well as reflecting on my positionality at key moments across this time.

3.2. Research design and pandemic-induced changes

Research questions can be developed from one's interaction with their world (DeLyser, 2001; Floyd & Arthur, 2012; McDowell, 2001; Whatmore, 2003). This research was born out of my personal and professional experiences. As an undergraduate student, I worked with a youth-focused organisation in South Africa, where I started to develop a deep understanding of various youth-related issues in the country. At the same time, people in my personal life,

friends, university acquaintances and family members, were struggling to find work after completing their studies. I was especially affected by the struggle of a very close friend, who searched for a job for almost two years until eventually moving to China to teach English as a foreign language. In addition to these experiences, I started to notice the posts about experiences of graduate unemployment on social media, especially on Twitter. Young people used hashtags like #HireAGraduate and #NoticeMe to make their profiles and qualifications visible, and to enquire about available job opportunities. They also used social media to vent about their circumstances: about the constant rejections or being "ghosted" by recruiters, about the emotional toll and the tension that it creates with their families. They also made jokes about their unemployment, where, for example, the graduate in the tweet below pokes fun at the possibilities that they dream up with the excessive amount of time that they suddenly have on their hands.

Figure 3: Screenshot from Twitter

Based on these encounters and observations, I was eager to develop a comprehensive, complex understanding of these young people's experiences. As I discussed in the previous chapter, when I started this research in 2019, I was initially interested in studying Black, graduate youth unemployment as a vital conjuncture (Johnson-Hanks, 2002). I was also interested in applying an intergenerational lens in order to understand two things: first, the ways in which relationships with family shaped young people's experiences of unemployment; and, secondly, how belonging to the "born free" generation played a role in producing particular kinds of expectations for self and from family. As a result, I had planned to conduct my research using three methods: employment history interviews, (participant) observation and key informant interviews. In order to capture the intergenerational dynamics, I was interested in interviewing the families of the young people as well. At this point, I was already confronted with methodological and ethical challenges. I was concerned about language barriers that might arise with attempts to interview family members. Besides my mother tongue, which I understand perfectly and speak fluently, I have very little to no command of the other six or so languages spoken by the majority of Black people in South Africa. This was compounded by concerns of potentially increasing tensions between young people and their families, and causing them further emotional distress by interviewing people with whom they have already strained or negative relationship due to their being unemployed. I attempted to address this ethical concern by taking the lead from the young people themselves, asking them to identify their family – people with whom they have warm, caring, positive intimate relationships – rather than imposing external ideas about family on them. Indeed, the research that I did conduct revealed that who these young people felt close to varied. Support systems were made up as much by friends, aunts, grandparents and online acquaintances as they were by nuclear family members.

Ultimately, due to the pandemic, I was not able to conduct this research in the way that I had designed it during the first phase of the research project. As the coronavirus and lockdowns spread across the world, I had to reconsider my research methods. There was a lot of uncertainty, and I was still hopeful that after a few months, I would be able to conduct the research as originally designed. Still, one of the first changes that I made was removing the family interviews from the original research design because of the heightened risk that

was involved – especially in the context of a global pandemic. I also started to think about the ways that I could still meet with participants while maintaining high standards for safety for both the participant and myself. Eventually, with deadlines remaining unchanged and the end of my funding approaching, I decided to go fully digital. I explore this in more detail in the section that follows. My field site changed from Gauteng – metaphorically and literally, "the place of gold" – where I was interested in exploring how young people navigate unemployment and job-seeking in the city of opportunities, to online spaces that are not geographically contained and where it is sometimes difficult to determine where participants are physically located based on their profile alone. Another aspect of the research design that was affected by the pandemic was the ability to conduct key informant interviews with people involved in employability programmes or government initiatives aimed at facilitating graduate employment. Following the advice of Harvey (2010: 196) to take a "polite yet persistent" approach to gaining access to key informants, I was only able to conduct one interview with a scholarship programme manager. Part of the challenge stemmed from the fact that people were either working from home or only working from the office on specific days as offices began to implement rotation systems for in-person work. On multiple occasions, the phone rang with no answer or I was asked to call on a day when the person I should speak to is in the office. Where I could find email addresses, I did not get a response. However, it is important to acknowledge that the factors influencing how and whether potential participants interacted with me were not limited to just work-related logistics. The pandemic was, and continues to be, a time of multiple and complex hardships for people who have had to confront illness, the loss of loved ones, financial crises as well as adjusting to new ways of working in their everyday lives. And this is true for all research participants. I reformulated my research questions in response to this challenge and the subsequent lack of anticipated data.

3.3. In the field

3.3.1. Pausing and unpausing

In conducting this research, I, too, spent a considerable amount of time waiting. I waited for lockdowns to be called off and for the borders to reopen so that I could travel from Oxford to Johannesburg to continue my doctoral research. Like most forms of waiting, and

especially the forms that my participants were engaged in, this was a productive time (Abebe, 2020). I continued to review the literature on graduate unemployment and various experiences of waithood. And when my research ethics application was approved, I conducted pilots of the interview method. Initially, I was interested in asking questions that focused primarily on young people's attempts at looking for work. However, after conducting the pilot interviews, I added categories to the research questions that considered other areas of life that emerged as essential to the everyday survival of unemployed graduates (i.e.: adding questions about daily routines, who they talk to when they are feeling down etc.). There was a time towards the end of 2020 when things appeared as though they were about to go back to "normal". I used this opportunity to apply for leave to conduct fieldwork through the completion of a university risk assessment form. I made plans to travel to Johannesburg in early January 2021, which meant ending my rental lease early as I had planned to be in South Africa for at least six months. However, on the eve of my flight, I was told that due to changes in UK government regulation, I would no longer be able to conduct fieldwork abroad. I am sharing this process to give some insight into what it was like to attempt to do empirical research during that time, which was characterised by uncertainty, chaos and anxiety (Nikolić, 2021). Of course, because I no longer had a place to stay in Oxford and my family home is in Pretoria, I went to South Africa anyway – where being with family helped to ease some of the concern that I was feeling about my research project. While I did not meet any participants while I was in South Africa due to COVID restrictions, being in South Africa was helpful insofar it made it easier to keep up with what was going on in the country, which isn't always easy to do from thousands of kilometres away.

3.3.2. Leaning into the digital

Digital ethnography has a long, 25-year-old tradition in academic work (Pink *et al.*, 2015). But unlike the early adopters, I was almost forced to use digital methods if I wanted to continue with the research project. This means that some of the methods that I came to employ were not part of the original plan. They were methods that I did not have any training or experience in, nor had I given them much thought before I was compelled to adopt them. It also meant that I felt frustrated but also uncertain and anxious about the quality of the data that I would be able to collect. Therefore, I spent a lot of time, in the beginning of the data collection phase, learning about digital ethnography. I benefitted

immensely from the articles, books and pieces of advice that academics shared on Twitter and the guidance from my supervisor (Howlett, 2021). While I strived to design careful, rigorous digital data collection methods, the combination of being a "newbie" and having time and resource constraints meant that the approach and implementation was not always perfect. However, I take comfort in the following words from a scholar who has a great deal of experience in conducting this kind of research (Góralska, 2020: 48):

> "Digital ethnography is a fluid work-in-progress that still gives a lot of liberty to researchers to develop their strategies of dealing with the digital field site and to learn from their own mistakes."

3.3.3. Recruiting participants

In my original research design, I had planned to use social media to recruit research participants. Based on the informal observations that I described in an earlier section of this chapter, I decided to focus on Twitter and LinkedIn as sites from which to recruit potential participants. In the end, the majority of the research participants were contacted on LinkedIn. LinkedIn is a business- and employment-focused social media platform which allows users to set up public profiles detailing their education and career history, as well as post text and other forms of audio-visual content that "connections" and even strangers can interact with (depending one's privacy settings). For my research, I was looking to interview people between the ages of 21 and 33 who had graduated from a university (an academic or comprehensive university or a university of technology) with at least a National Diploma and consider themselves to be under- or unemployed. I used the hashtags that I knew were popular among graduates looking for employment (i.e.: #HireAGraduate) to find potential participants. Before contacting them, I looked at their profiles to determine whether they fit the research criteria. I then sent them a private message/direct message about the research, asking if they would like to participate in an interview. This process was much more difficult to follow on Twitter because people's profiles don't always contain the information that I would need to determine whether someone fit the criteria of the participant that I was looking for. While I was reaching out to potential participants on LinkedIn, I learned very quickly that I needed to pay closer attention to the ways in which I approached young people in order to avoid confusion and causing feelings of disappointment. Following the

approach outlined above, I sent a version of the following message to the first couple of people that I contacted:

> "I am conducting PhD research on graduate unemployment in South Africa. I am looking for volunteers to participate in *an interview*. *The interviews* are about one to two hours long and the questions are mainly about unemployment and experiences of looking for work. There is no obligation to take part. Are you interested in *being interviewed*? I will send you more information if you are." [added emphasis]

After sending this message to one young man LinkedIn, he responded by saying that he is not a university graduate but has work experience and is "a great asset". Although he had included education qualifications in his profile, he was not able to finish his studies due to financial constraints – something that too many young people face. A while later, he posted the following from his page:

> "I almost got the interview I was hoping for but because I am not a graduate, experience did not win this time around. I am grateful to have someone contact me with a possible interview though."

Upon reading this, I felt a pang of guilt. There are fleeting moments in everyday life when temporality is explicitly exposed: when the sound of an email notification can create a hopeful moment before reading, from the sender, that they "regret to inform you.." – which can feel like a knife to the heart (Bryant & Knight, 2019: 197). LinkedIn, especially, is the type of platform that can create these intensely hopeful moments that are closely followed by disappointment when the notification doesn't bring the potentially life-changing news that the young people on the platform are hoping to hear. My message created one of those moments, and in this case, was confused for an opportunity to interview for a job. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial scholarship, Pettit (2020) calls for researchers to embrace and render visible the uncomfortable emotions that are faced during fieldwork. In doing so, we can highlight the ethical tensions that are present in the research and work towards creating relationships in the field that are rooted in justice, empathy and respect (Pettit, 2020). Noticing the uncomfortable emotion that I had during this encounter, I revised the message that I sent to potential research participants. I made sure to introduce myself as a researcher and then to introduce the research project as fully as possible. And instead of using the word "interview" in the introductory message, I asked whether they would be willing to talk to me

for an hour or two about their own experiences of unemployment. Once they agreed, I sent them the information sheet about the research as well as the consent form. I also clarified, to the young man with whom I had this interaction, that I was conducting a research project.

3.3.4. Online interviews

For those who were happy to move forward, we arranged a time and a date to talk either on WhatsApp or via Zoom. WhatsApp is the most popular social media platform in South Africa because it's a lower cost way of communicating with people via text, call and video (Lith, 2023). Therefore, it was convenient to for us to communicate this way as everyone was familiar with the app. I gave participants the option of using Zoom in case they felt uncomfortable with sharing their phone number with me. Before we spoke on WhatsApp, I sent young people an airtime voucher of R200 for their time and in acknowledgement of the prohibitively high costs of airtime and data in South Africa (Graham, 2019; Harrisberg & Mensah, 2022). In total, I interviewed 37 graduates. Twenty-nine of them were women and 8 of them were men. This is partly due to the fact that there were less men that I could find online. And even for those I did send a message to, the response rate was lower than that from the women. They graduated from 14 of the 26 public universities in South Africa, with one participant having graduated from a private university. There were almost equal numbers of STEM and non-STEM graduates. They all possessed dreams of improving their situation. They dreamed of working as microbiologists, development economists, communication specialists and principal engineers. Class is a somewhat slippery concept within the South African context. There is little clarity on who constitutes what classes – especially the middle class (Zizzamia *et al*., 2016). Seekings & Nattrass (2005) defined class positions mostly in terms of occupational groupings and employment status. Based on this, very few of the research participants could be said to belong to a privileged class. Many of them had parents who were unemployed, some had parents who were teachers and very few had parents who were employed in high-income jobs. The obvious limitation of recruiting participants online and conducting the research online is that it leaves out the young people who are not able to access the internet, and these may be people who are especially vulnerable in a context where the cost of accessing the internet can be a significant barrier for many people. In further research, snowballing, asking participants to introduce me to young people who are in similar situations in their neighbourhoods or other

places where they hang out, might be an effective way of bringing together the online and the offline.

I left the choice of whether we were going to conduct the interview via voice or video call up to the participants. All participants, except two, chose to speak over voice call. There could be several reasons for this choice, including the fear of engaging with a stranger in a slightly more intimate format as well as the fact that video calls require more bandwidth and use up more mobile data. Or, as Deakin & Wakefield (2013) argue, for some, seeing themselves on the screen can be a source of unease or anxiety. Inspired by Valentine (2005) on the benefits of using conversational style interviews as research methodology, I started each interview by asking "Can you tell me about yourself?" This, she argues, is an effective way of encouraging participants to talk about issues in their own words and to highlight the issues that are important to them (Valentine, 2005: 111). I did find that when people answered this question, it signalled to me potential moments, events or themes that they considered formative, and I took the lead from them by asking follow-up questions along the same lines. But for some people, the question was overwhelming and reminded them of interviewing for a job. See, for example, the reactions that some of these young people had to the question:

> "*Laughs out loud* It's like it's an interview for a job. I am from the Eastern Cape in Lusikisiki. I don't know what more to tell you about myself." (Lizwi, 26, male, Wits Construction graduate)
>
> "*Laughs out loud* It sounds like a job interview. I'm triggered." (Siphokazi, unknown age, female, Rhodes Economics graduate)
>
> "I always find that question a bit tricky because I feel like I have so much to say." (Semakaleng, 27, female, UP Engineering graduate)
>
> "That's very broad! *Laughs out loud*" (Remoneilwe, 26, female, NWU Business Management graduate)

The interviews followed a semi-structured format, where I introduced five main topics for discussion: family background, education, employment, feelings/emotions and aspirations. We talked about their dreams and their plans for pursuing them, their strategies for finding a job and acquiring skills that might make them more competitive in the labour market,

thoughts about migrating abroad, and ideas for establishing entrepreneurship projects. During these discussions, I quickly became interested in the "everydayness" (the constant, the embeddedness in the mundane) of their pursuit for desirable jobs and a less precarious life. I also became interested in their attempts to overcome the repetitiveness of the everyday, the negative moments (i.e.: when five job rejections get sent on the same day) and the neoliberal-induced feelings of worthlessness and self-doubt. In-depth life history interviews are particularly well-placed to elicit rich accounts about people's everyday lives (Brannen, 2013). Within these interviews, I asked questions that covered a broad range of temporalities to include presents, pasts and futures. This approach is especially compatible with research that seeks to understand temporalities, relationality and everyday lives (Holmes & Hall, 2020). I encouraged young people to talk about the past, mostly in reference to their childhoods, their families and their educational trajectories, and to reflect on how they felt then but also how they feel now about those memories. For example, I asked participants about graduation, how they felt then when they walked across the stage to collect their certificates and how they feel as they recollect the memory in the present. I also prompted participants to talk about their futures. By doing this, I was able to capture the complexity of everyday life over and in time (Holmes & Hall, 2020).

Throughout the interview process, there was variety in the way that participants engaged with me and the extent to which they were willing to share their stories openly and enthusiastically. I argue that digital-mediation has a significant role to play in this variation. The anonymity provided by WhatsApp voice calls can either amplify or minimise a participant's desire to express themselves (Block & Erskine, 2012). I found that for some of the young people that I interviewed, the effect was to minimise their expression. They gave very short answers and often simply one-word answers. There are various factors that could be at play here. Several authors have written about the challenges of gaining trust and building rapport, where the researcher has fewer tools or opportunities available to ease the interaction (Block & Erskine, 2012). For example, I cannot give participants a reassuring smile or nod my head to encourage them to continue talking over a voice call. And the participants are unable to assess my credibility as an interviewer and, therefore, start to build trust. These issues were compounded by technical issues – it was hard to come back to a flowing discussion after several disconnections over a short span of time. What I found interesting

was that one of these participants, who seemed disengaged during the phone interview, sent me a text message on WhatsApp afterwards, to say that she hopes that I got enough information from her and used the chat to answer some of the questions that I had asked on the phone. Some people are just reserved, especially on a phone call to someone that they don't know. And it is important to, firstly, continue to give people options for communication methods in a way that prioritises their comfort and, secondly, to consider using more than one method with interviewees.

On the other hand, there were participants who were very eager to share. Here, the anonymity functioned like a confessional (where the shame was a result of the internalisation of neoliberal logics of traditional adulthood). After the interviews, when I asked whether participants had anything else that they would like to share, some of them took the opportunity reflect on the interview itself:

> "[The interview] was triggering. I'm not gonna lie. These are things I think about everyday but talking about them is like 'Damn, bro. You're really struggling.' But opening up about the reality of things makes me realise that 'Oh, damn chile.' But I think it is also good because one day when I've made it in life, I can look back and say, 'I had an interview with this girl when I was struggling – sort of like a reference.'" (Siphokazi, unknown age, female, Rhodes Economics graduate)

> "At least I had someone to talk to. I kind of feel relieved in a way. I didn't know I needed to offload as much as I did. So I have to thank you for giving me the opportunity. I feel lighter in some way. A certain weight has been lifted off my shoulders." (Anele, 35, male, UFH Industrial Relations graduate)

> "I kind of feel like I'm speaking to a psychologist. I've never spoken to someone the way I'm doing with you and telling them how I'm feeling and the situation that I'm in right now. You know when talking to people that you know, you don't open up about everything thinking that they will judge you. I have to say I'm happy with this call. It also helped me." (Noxolo, 28, female, UJ Public Management graduate)

When I went into the field, I saw myself as an insider researcher. Ayindoho (2008: 28) defines an insider researcher as someone who is conducting research "within a group with which one self-identifies as a member". I thought this was the case because my respondents and I are around the same age, I attended the same or similar universities as some of them and anticipated sharing similar backgrounds with some. Several scholars (i.e.: Abidin, 2020; Ademolu, 2023) advise against adopting a dichotomous insider/outsider framework while

attempting to find one's footing in the field because, in reality, "there is slippage and fluidity between these two states" (Abidin, 2020: 58). The research participants in my study were often unsure of where to place me. Conversations at the end of the interview consisted of these young people questioning me: about where I was from, what I was studying, why I chose to study that and where my university was located. I think it's interesting note, especially in light of the empirical discussion on migration in Chapter Four, that the people who asked me these questions didn't know where the University of Oxford was or much about the United Kingdom. Whereas, for example, I suspect that many more young people would know about Harvard University and that it's in the United States due to how often the institution features in popular culture. However, this caused me to reflect further on my positionality, as well as about the differences in geographies of aspiration between white and Black South Africans (the latter is explored in more detail in the chapter that follows). I would posit that to be aware of opportunities to study and live in the UK as a South African, which is an activity that is overwhelmingly dominated by white South Africans, suggests a particular level of privilege or at least access to privileged spaces. Unlike the people that I met when I arrived in Oxford, who had dreamed about "winning" the Rhodes and other prestigious scholarships for years, I came across the opportunity in a kind of haphazard manner, when I was looking for *any* opportunity to leave South Africa (ideally through sponsored study) after the very sudden death of a loved one. However, the fact that I was studying at the university from which the majority of Rhodes Scholars are recruited and selected means that I had more access to opportunities like that by simply paying attention to what was happening around me.

What I argue, however, is that it is the differences between us that encouraged some of the informants to warm up to me (Abidin, 2020). In a way, as the quotes above illustrate, I was seen as a passing confidante, someone who is merely passing through and won't be around to judge them, unlike their family and their friends. They felt comfortable sharing as much as they did because, as an outsider, I was going to leave and take their "secrets" with me. What's also crucial to point out, based on the feedback given to me by these young people, is that there is very little to no psychosocial support for young people who are not in school and who do not have jobs. Even though they were glad to speak to me about these issues, they should be able to speak to a trained professional about the challenges that they face.

The final aspect of the online interviews that I would like to discuss concerns emotions. As research in other contexts has demonstrated (i.e.: Pettit, 2020; 2019), talking about the lived experiences of everyday unemployment can be deeply upsetting. However, conducting interviews via voice calls made it very difficult for me to detect emotional distress during the interviews. To address this, I reminded interviewees that they could stop the interview at any time. I also tried to pay attention to changes in tone and voice, as well as sniffles and long silences – I offered participants a break when I suspected that they may be experiencing negative emotions. However, the "work" that our bodies do in communicating feelings of discomfort is lost with non-video digital methods. At the end of every interview, I made sure to signpost mental health/psycho-social support that is available online (and, if possible, in the areas in which they are located). I sent this information again in a text message shortly after the interview. Highlighting the relational nature of research is just as important as exploring relationality as an object of empirical study. Scholars have argued that "participants and researchers become something new for and with each other during the course of qualitative study and beyond it" (Hall, 2009: 268). After the field research, I managed to keep in touch with some of the participants. A lot of them reached out to ask for help with proofreading an application for a job or further studies, or help with problem-solving (i.e.: writing emails to follow up with recruiters). I, similarly, shared my struggles about completing my research. These exchanges allowed us to cultivate openness and care beyond the field (Hall, 2009). By doing social research, we are making implicit claims about issues that concern us emotionally and intellectually, and that those issues should concern others as well. This work is inescapably subjective and inescapably emotional.

3.3.5. Studying everyday digital archives

While I was conducting these interviews, it became clear that social media, and LinkedIn especially, were an important site through which graduates navigated and coped with everyday unemployment. As a result, LinkedIn became one of the fieldsites for this research. However, it presented plenty of methodological challenges. During the interviews, I started to ask participants about how and why they use LinkedIn, and then asked if I could look at their LinkedIn pages to learn more about them and their experiences. Then I had to work

out how to extract that data from LinkedIn. When I was studying the profiles of people who've had accounts for a long time and/or posted often, I was overwhelmed by the sheer amount of data that I had to collect and analyse. This was made even more complicated by the fact that it wasn't just text, but the data was made up of images, videos and audio as well. While I imagine that there are easier and more professional ways to go about collecting this data, I simply scrolled (sometimes for hours) to the bottom of their page, where they posted for the first time. And then I dragged my cursor all the way back to the top in order to copy and paste all of the information into a word file. To (partially) address the problems related to the volume of data, I set a cut-off date: I only considered posts that were made before 1 October 2021. One of the limitations of this approach is that, unless I went to each post and expanded the comments section, I could only see the post that was made but not how others interacted with it. This kind of information would have been valuable for unpacking the relational aspects of everyday unemployment and, potentially, the types of convivial spaces that can form online (akin to the "*fadas*" in Masquelier's (2013) research on young men in Niger). My aim was to use LinkedIn to learn something about everyday unemployment, rather than just something about LinkedIn or social media per se.

I thought of young people's LinkedIn posts as an interactive archive of everyday life which captures the constantly changing present as well as how people experience the world and the innovative ways that they express those experiences online (Hookway, 2017). I understand the value of this particular set of data in a way that is similar to how Ramsden-Karelse (2023: 2) understands the Kewpie Collection[9] as:

> "… efforts [by the collection's creators] to reimagine their conditions of precarity to enable what Kewpie calls 'hav[ing] a life to live', which [is understood] as analogous to what Judith Butler (2004) terms a liveable life."

Using photographs, Ramsden-Karelse (2023) argues, Kewpie brings into visibility a world in which having a life to live is possible. What she terms the "precarious archive" is understood to have three features: first, its materials were created by and depict people who experienced precarity; second, it represents strategies used to contest conditions of

[9] "The Collection depicts a group of self-described gays and girls living in District Six, a multicultural, inner-city area of apartheid Cape Town, before and during the District's physical destruction by the Nationalist government" (Ramsden-Karelse, 2023: 1).

precarity; and third, the materials constituting the archive themselves circulate precariously (Ramsden-Karelse, 2023: 3). While I don't use the term "precarious" in the same way, young people's LinkedIn posts function in ways that are similar to Ramsden-Karelse's precarious archive: a form of personal life record offering insights into young people's attempts to keep going in the face of increasing neoliberal insecurity. One of the benefits of this approach is that it is less susceptible to the problems of retrospective recall and reconstruction that are faced by interview methods (Hookway, 2017). However, at the same time, field research was not done in order to reveal particular "truths" or obtain perfect factual accuracies. I was looking to explore the intersubjective performances and labours in everyday life that are shaped by the socio-economic and cultural context (Burr, 2003; Taylor, 2006). It's also important to acknowledge that people write their social media posts for an audience, and are therefore engaged in a kind of "face work" or performance. On Instagram, for example, users feel the pressure to engage in particular aesthetic performances that convey living a good and maybe even glamorous life. LinkedIn has a different affective atmosphere. The goal is to present an image of self that is professional, talented, capable and entrepreneurial. What I would do differently, in future research, would be to involve the authors of these digital archives more actively in the process of analysing and making sense of the data. After collecting this data, I would arrange another discussion with the interviewee, to reflect on the online posts: Under what circumstances were they made? How do they feel about them now? How did they imagine the future then compared to now? This might have helped to entangle what was real from what was performance, although the performance itself is a crucial site to study in order to understand everyday unemployment.

3.4. Making sense of the data

Data analysis was an iterative process. I recorded the interviews, and then transcribed the bulk of them towards the end of the fieldwork period. However, between interviews, I kept a field diary and in it I made notes about the interviews and potential thematic codes. Once all of the interview data had been transcribed, I cleaned it up and analysed it on NVivo – using a thematic coding approach to identify common patterns, differences and other significant insights that emerged throughout the research. I conducted several rounds of coding, with each subsequent round informed by insights, questions and doubts from the previous round. As scholars note (i.e.: Corbin & Strauss, 2008), the more time that one spends with

the data, the more insights, potential meanings and questions emerge. I found myself going back to the research questions, the literature and adopting manual coding processes alongside NVivo to ensure that I was able to produce a just, meaningful and accurate account of the lives of the young people that I spoke to. There are two approaches to life history interview analysis: the first approach takes data as a symbolic narrative which represents the contemporary lifeworld of an individual, while the other approach takes data as an accurate description of an individual's life trajectory (Bertaux & Kohli, 1984). In this research, I relied more on the former approach because I was interested in examining young people's lifeworlds rather than determining "facts".

Analysing the LinkedIn data was messy and challenging. But I tried to focus on bringing the data into conversation with some of the themes that had arisen during the field research phase. I went through a process of manual "open coding" (Crang, 2005: 222), where I started to work slowly through the material, examining each post and trying to think through what each one was meant to convey or what was being done and why by the poster. I assigned explanatory text to the data that was in image or video form, so that I was able to analyse it alongside the data that was originally in text format. And as ideas stated to emerge about the themes in the data, I noted them down. Eventually, across the interview and LinkedIn data, I developed seven themes, which I labelled: aspirations, feelings, motivation, support, government, job searching and higher education. As I started to write, read some more and continuously go back to the data, I was able to refine the themes.

3.5. Ethics as practice

This research has adhered to the ethics procedures at the University of Oxford, where I trained in research ethics and submitted an application to the Central University Research Ethics Committee for research in the social sciences and the humanities with human participants. I gained informed consent from all of my participants, where I sent them the consent form to read before the interviews and then read it again at the start of the interview to obtain oral consent. I have anonymised my respondents by providing pseudonyms for them, and omitting social media information that might link to any participants. I have disabled the setting on my LinkedIn profile that allows people to see who I have "connected" with on the platform.

However, as Valentine (2005: 345) states, ethical research "is not only a question of having a rubber stamp from the ethics committee'". The ethics surrounding digital research are particularly messy. The ethical tension that played on my mind frequently concerned the ethics of "lurking" in the public space of the internet. These debates are still ongoing in the literature (Góralska, 2020). As I have already mentioned, I asked permission from participants before I collected their LinkedIn data. However, there is still tension regarding how I can present this data in my writing up of the research findings. Although online posts are written publicly, it's unlikely that the authors would have considered that they may feature in a doctoral thesis or an academic article one day. Lester (2020: 418), for instance, notes how a study concerning the online behaviour of youth in Sweden revealed that "even when posting on a public space, the youth maintained expectations of privacy". This suggests that scholars should conceive of privacy as a continuum. LinkedIn is a fairly public platform. However, there are settings which allow you to control who can see your connections, your last name, your email address and whether people can search for and find your profile using your email address or phone number. When you post something, you can also choose whether you want anyone (on or off LinkedIn) to see it, just your connections or you can post it to a private group that you are a member of. Because of the way that LinkedIn is used (i.e.: looking for jobs), I suspect that people configure their settings in a way that allows them to reach as many people as possible (so, in other words, creating a very public profile).

Because my research consists of both the LinkedIn data and the interviews (which contain personal information), it is important to ensure that even if I use the LinkedIn data, the anonymity of the research participants remains intact. I had to think through what the best way was to present this data in my writing in light of providing privacy, given also that one could search certain phrases in order to find a particular post and its author. Therefore, while the quotes from interviews are reported verbatim, the LinkedIn data is paraphrased to minimise the possibility of it being discovered by a reader. The tweet that I included in the beginning of this chapter does not belong to one of the young people that I interviewed as part of this research. I came across the tweet while I was passing time on Twitter. Although the tweet was from a public account and had over 25 000 engagements at the time that I

took the screenshot, I blocked out the author's display name, handle and profile picture, as well as those of people who responded to the tweet. However, for public figures (i.e.: celebrities, influencers), I have included screenshots from their social media accounts without blocking out any of the aforementioned information.

3.6. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out the process through which I collected the data that forms the basis for the empirical chapters that are central to this thesis. This process involved waiting patiently for turbulent periods to pass but also acting swiftly when opportunities presented themselves. I then went on to describe how I engaged participants, highlighting, rather than trying to hide (as neoliberal-led academia would have us do) the emotions and forms of caring that are part of and required by doing qualitative research on the everyday. I have shown the ways in which this process is riddled with ethical and political challenges – especially in the realm of the digital.

Employing life history interviews and digital approaches like the one that I have described here have proven to be highly valuable for comprehensively studying the complexities of graduate unemployment and how it is lived in everyday life. Interviews, through their rich and nuanced forms of inquiry, allow us to trace the trajectory of the lives of individuals, uncovering multiple temporalities by encouraging participants to reflect on pasts, presents and futures. This helps to shed light on the challenges that are faced and the strategies that are used to overcome them. The digital method allows us to reach back into the past, to uncover past experiences, feelings, moments, opinions, and to bring them back into the present through conversation with the interview data. Together, these approaches allow for a dynamic exploration of everyday unemployment.

4 Higher Education in South Africa: grand narratives, realities, and ambivalent appraisals

4.1. Introduction

> "I didn't really choose DUT [Durban University of Technology]. It chose me."

I met Nomfundo, an Electrical Engineering graduate from DUT, in April 2021. At the time of our meeting, she had been looking for a job for about four months, and was hopeful that something would come up. While there were a range of things that caused her to feel frustrated and sometimes disheartened as an unemployed graduate, it was clear that being educated was one of them. In particular, it was the fact that she had had to endure a very challenging four years of higher education – where the time, resources and struggles (to get in and to get through university) were understood as an investment into a brighter, more secure future through access to work. But instead of arriving at that future, what she was facing was more struggle:

> "It's really depressing, seeing that I went to study, I'm done [but] I can't secure a job."

When I was conducting these interviews, using the semi-structured interview script that I had designed and piloted months before, I asked these young people questions about higher education: about where they went to university, what they studied and why, and when they graduated. However, these questions, from my perspectives, were more like a demographic questionnaire, intended to capture basic facts about the participants. However, what became increasingly clear was how central young people's experiences of higher education were to their biography – especially their experiences of trying to get into university. They spent a long time narrating their experiences on questions related to higher education, and, sometimes, these issues were brought up when I asked them to tell me about themselves. This was certainly the case during my interview with Nomfundo, where a significant portion of the interview was spent discussing what it took for Nomfundo to get to graduation. First, she told me about how DUT "chose" her:

> "I applied at UJ [University of Johannesburg], Wits [University of the Witwatersrand], DUT, Mangosuthu [University of Technology]. Mangosuthu I applied for mechanical engineering and they accepted me but, ja, I wasn't going to go there. And then at Wits, I had an issue of funding because I wasn't gonna travel from the rural areas— at home, there's no stable income, you know. My

> grandmother sells clothes. I couldn't really go to Wits because at the time I didn't get NSFAS [a National Student Financial Aid Scheme loan]. Wits gave me registration fee. So I was gonna register for free. [But] I had to think where am I gonna get accommodation. When I'm checking online, I see the nearby accommodation there is around R4 000, R3 500. Where am I gonna get this money for starters while looking for funding? DUT, I had siblings that stay in Durban so it was much easier with that. I only got funding in March. It was that. I never really wanted to go to DUT, I swear. I wanted to go outside of the province but funding and everything."

There are tens of millions of young people who are unemployed in South Africa. And, as I discussed in Chapter One, the vast majority of them do not have university qualifications. However, for those who are unemployed and have graduated from university, that higher education experience shapes the subsequent experience of unemployment in important ways, especially for Black youth from disadvantaged backgrounds. The narratives around their transition to and time in higher education highlight experiences of struggling and making every effort and investment to succeed. During this time, they experienced significant amounts of stress, frustration, disappointment and, for Thabo, exploitation (see Chapter One). However, they persevered because they understood this time as an investment into a much brighter future for themselves and for their families. Therefore, when that future does not materialise, the disappointment is intensified by the prospect of transitioning from one set of struggles to another. In this chapter, I ask: what role does higher education play in shaping young people's experiences of unemployment? I answer this question in four sections. In the first section, using four key strategy documents, I explore government narratives about the future economy of South Africa, and how the higher education sector and young people are featured within the government's processes of futuring. In the second section, I discuss the constraints faced by young people as they attempt to enter higher education and the complex factors that feature in their decision-making processes. I argue that placing these experiences alongside the government narratives discussed in the first section illustrates the presence of a disjuncture between government expectations and young people's lived realities. In sections three and four, I explore the consequences of this disjuncture. Section three discusses the three different ways that young people have re-evaluated the purpose of higher education in light of their own experiences, which, I argue, could itself be seen as a form of everyday futuring. And in section four, I briefly discuss the devastation that is experienced as a result of experiences of

unemployment that are preceded by challenging journeys into and through higher education. This is the context within which the remaining empirical chapters must be understood.

This chapter brings together literatures on futures and on higher education in an attempt to further our understanding of how graduate unemployment is experienced by young people in South Africa. Geographical scholarship on education is diverse and vibrant, and has grown significantly in the 21st century, due to increasing links between education and the economy, and the growing importance for individuals to have qualifications in order to participate in labour markets (Kraftl *et al*., 2022: 17). Higher education research, in particular, has taken various directions, focusing on themes such as the neoliberalisation of higher education institutions, internationalisation, student mobility and critiques of university rankings (see Kraftl *et al*., 2022 for a summary of some of the geographic work in this area). However, this research remains dominated by white Anglocentric voices from the global North (Desai, 2017; Gough *et al*, 2019; Kraftl *et al*., 2022; Noxolo, 2017). Research about higher education in South Africa shares a similar focus on themes related to the neoliberal university and internationalisation, with a particularly large scholarly tradition on colonial/decolonial education and transformation of the higher education sector (Hlatshwayo, 2022; Madlingozi, 2023; Nyamnjoh, 2016; Unterhalter & Allais, 2022). However, given the extent to which poverty and inequality continue to be linked to the lack of access to (higher) education opportunities, there is surprisingly limited research about access to higher education in South Africa (De Lannoy *et al.*, 2015; Rogan, 2019; Martinez-Vargas *et al*., 2020; Walker, 2019). And the literature that does exist is dominated by quantitative studies (Rogan, 2019; Martinez-Vargas *et al*., 2020; Walker, 2019, 2022). Walker's (2019) research with young people in the Free State province of South Africa is an exception. Studying the higher education access experiences of a group of first-year students at the University of the Free State, she argues that young people do not have equal substantive freedoms (in Amartya Sen's terms) to make choices about "who they want to be and what they want to do" (Walker, 2019: 58). In this chapter, my aim is to not only add experiential depth to the literature on higher education access in South Africa, but I also enhance the work that has already been done by Walker by linking these experiences to later experiences of unemployment. The chapter also responds to calls for more research from the global South,

acknowledging that higher education experiences may differ significantly based on context (Gough *et al*., 2019).

4.2. Anticipating "The Future"

> "The doors of learning and culture shall be opened!
>
> The government shall discover, develop and encourage national talent for the enhancement of our cultural life;
>
> All the cultural treasures of mankind shall be open to all, by free exchange of books, ideas and contact with other lands;
>
> The aim of education shall be to teach the youth to love their people and their culture, to honour human brotherhood, liberty and peace;
>
> Education shall be free, compulsory, universal and equal for all children;
>
> Higher education and technical training shall be opened to all by means of state allowances and scholarships awarded on the basis of merit;
>
> Adult literacy shall be ended by a mass state education plan;
>
> Teachers shall have all the rights of other citizens;
>
> The colour bar in cultural, in sport and in education shall be abolished." (Congress of the People, 1955: 5)

A wide range of actors, including governments, are increasingly mobilising the idea of "the future", especially related to intersecting global crises around rapid technological transformation, climate change and the inability of capitalist economic systems to meet the social needs of the world's majority (Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021). Ben Anderson, a cultural-political geographer whose research aims to understand how life is governed in, by and through emergencies, uses ideas related to temporalities of the future to show how states in the global North use new forms and practices of anticipation (or a kind of "anticipatory politics") to act on discontinuous futures (Anderson, 2010; Anderson *et al*., 2019). Discourses of emergency, crisis and threat are used to manage the process of governance by justifying various interventions (Anderson, 2010). Anderson (2010: 777),

contends that the USA's pre-emptive action in the war against Iraq and Afghanistan was carried out in the name of preventing terror attacks in the U.S. Regardless of whether these threats are real, imagined or constructed, we have to pay attention to these anticipatory politics and their attendant actions because "geographies are made and lived in the name of preempting [sic], preparing for, or preventing threats to neoliberal-democratic life" in the global North (Anderson, 2010: 777). In this section, I discuss the anticipatory politics of successive ANC governments (as they relate to the economic future of South Africa). I am especially interested in how expectations of a digital technology-dominated future and ambitions to be a competitive participant in the global knowledge economy shape government narratives and interventions in the present, and how the higher education sector and young people are both imagined in this future and impacted by these narratives in the present. Production of a linear past to present to future national trajectory requires certain forms of (neoliberal) subjectivities, and both higher education institutions and young people are variously implicated in reproducing and resisting those subjectivities (Patel, 2000: 47).

The text that is presented at the start of this section is quoted from the Freedom Charter (see Chapter Two). It shows what the ANC (then still a liberation movement) and its allies envisioned and sought to mobilise with regards to the future of education in South Africa. However, there has since been a significant departure from this vision, as illustrated in the five-to-ten-year policy and strategy documents produced by different governments over the years. These documents are one of the (most important) ways through which governments articulate preferred visions of the future, and these policies are used to justify decisions that are made in the present (Jordan, 2018: 45). It is important for us to study these documents carefully, in order to understand both what is being proposed and promoted as well as the roadmap that is intended to get us there (Jordan, 2018: 46).

4.2.1. Reaching a digital-enabled future through education

Under the leadership of former President Jacob Zuma, the National Development Plan (NDP) 2030 was drafted and published between 2009 and 2012. The goal of this Plan is to outline strategies and actions for "eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, growing the economy by an average of 5.4 percent, and cutting the unemployment rate to 6 percent by 2030"

(National Planning Commission (NPC): 2012: 270). These targets were set with considerations for how the world is changing and speculation regarding what the world will look like in the future – particularly in the wake of the growing global knowledge economy and trends related to what has been termed the Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR). However, South Africa is not alone in attempts to position itself for a future in which economic development is determined by these two forces. This is a global phenomenon. Imaginaries of the global knowledge economy became potent in the late 1990s, with neoliberal multi-lateral institutions like the World Trade Organisation (WTO), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the World Economic Forum (WEF) framing the rollout of the discourse surrounding the future (Jessop, 2012; Robertson, 2005). These organisations have defined the 4IR and the knowledge economy in the following ways:

> "The Fourth Industrial Revolution represents a fundamental change in the way we live, work and relate to one another. It is a new chapter in human development, enabled by extraordinary technology advances commensurate with those of the first, second and third industrial revolutions." (WEF, n.d.)

> "A new practice of production… an economy built around ideas and intellectual capital – from software to patents – driven by technology" (Unger, 2022: 10)

Speaking at the first South African Digital Economy Summit in 2019, President Ramaphosa affirmed these directions for future economic development, stating that if the country wants to create its own Silicon Valley, it needs to focus its energies on the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Shapshak, 2019). He continued to say (Shapshak, 2019):

> "Given what we know today about the potential beneficial impacts of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we must embrace this historic confluence of human insights and engagement, artificial intelligence and technology, to rise to the challenges of poverty, unemployment and inequality."

To facilitate this focus on the 4IR for development, Ramaphosa set up the Presidential Commission on the Fourth Industrial Revolution in 2019. The Commission is made up of CEOs, academics and investors, and its mandate is to "identify policies, strategies and plans that are needed to position South Africa as a leading country in the evolution and development of the 4IR" (Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services, 2019: 6). And speaking at an event held in honour of China's President Xi Jinping's state visit in July

2018, Ramaphosa emphasised the desire to be a competitive participant in the knowledge economy (South African Government, 2018):

> "Science, technology and innovation is an integral part of South Africa's National Development Plan, both as a means to bolster economic growth and competitiveness, and advance social development. Fostering a vibrant knowledge economy and a culture of entrepreneurship is at the heart of our government's development agenda."

Education, and especially the post-school (higher education) sector, has been positioned as critical to the attainment of these goals. The role that education is expected to play in the development agenda is enshrined in four key policy and strategy documents: the National Development Plan 2030 (NPC, 2012), the White Paper for Post-School Education and Training (DHET, 2013), the Department of Higher Education and Training's Revised Strategic Plan 2020 – 2025 (DHET, 2019) and the National Youth Policy 2020 – 2030 (DWYPD, 2019). These documents were developed and published under two different administrations of ANC governance (Zuma, 2009 to 2018 and Ramaphosa, 2019 to the present), but the message about the role of higher education remains consistent: it is to develop the human and intellectual capital required to drive economic growth. By 2025, the DHET aims to achieve "an integrated, coordinated and articulated PSET [post-school education and training] system for improved economic participation and the social development of youth and adults" (DHET, 2019: 22). Across all of these documents, the government has identified three areas of higher education where intervention is required in order to bring about the kind of economic growth and development that they envision. First is the need to dedicate more time and resources to science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) education. The NDP, for example, calls for the DHET to "build national institutions" for STEM (p. 315), and, in the White Paper, DHET states that "it will intervene to encourage expansions in specific areas as required by national needs… in particular areas of engineering and technology" (p. 30). The second focus is related to the academic profession, for which the NDP states "requires a renewal if South African universities are to expand, compete and drive the knowledge society and economy" (p. 317). In particular, the Plan (NPC, 2012) calls for an increase in the number of academic staff in STEM subjects and ensuring that they develop and teach subjects and curricula that align with the needs of industry. The next set of higher education interventions that have been identified are related to

curriculum-alignment, industry participation in higher education and the provision of career guidance in technology-based sectors of the economy (DWYPD, 2019; DHET, 2013). Employers are said to be "among [higher education's] major beneficiaries", and are thus expected to contribute to making the sector a success (DHET, 2013: viii).

The plans laid out in these policy and strategy documents represent a far departure from what was inscribed in the Freedom Charter. What academics and activists around the world have repeatedly highlighted is that while the initial impetus for public schooling was to teach people how to be citizens, this is no longer the case (Standing, 2013). Instead, the primary purpose of (higher) education is to serve the needs of the economy (Clegg, 2010; Lanning, 1994; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017; Marais, 2011; Maistry, 2014; Swanson, 2013). In South Africa, the government has attempted to maintain at least a rhetorical balance between education as a public good and education as a tool for economic growth (Hlatshwayo, 2022). The White Paper emphasises that it does not intend to "devalue the intrinsic importance of education", but this immediately followed by stressing "the need to improve the performance of the economy" (p. 3), illustrating that neoliberal discourses of education, as primarily tools for the economy, are central while all other purposes of education are tangential (Lanning, 1994). Moreover, STEM subjects have been the focus of higher education reforms. And where, as in the White Paper, other areas for education are acknowledged as important (such as health and teacher education), it is because this kind of education contributes to reproducing the teachers and the workforce required for the 4IR and knowledge economy. During an interview with the Council on Foreign Relations in 2022, Foreign Affairs minister (and former DHET minster) Dr Naledi Pandor echoed much of what's presented in these documents about subjects that should be a priority (Council on Foreign Relations, 2021):

> "We must ensure that we have greater skills development on the continent, in critical skills areas. I don't think we want any more arts trainers. Sorry to the arts people. But I think science is very important – technology, engineering. Cause those are the skills we desperately need. I think, as well, in the finance and economic sectors, we need highly trained people. Then information and communication technologies."[10]

To use Anderson's (2010) words: because the ANC government pre-empts a tech-dominated, knowledge economy future, they prepare to participate competitively in this future by

[10] Pandor's spokesperson later apologised on her behalf, saying that she was misunderstood (Sithole, 2023).

developing a pipeline of future-proof, (STEM) skilled workforces. And the threat that they aim to prevent is falling behind other nations in their development goals. These discourses, plans and policies have significant implications for the higher education sector in South Africa, for students and staff – many which of which have already been felt (Hlatshwayo, 2022)[11]. Because of these (and other, anticipated) consequences, it is important to highlight that successive ANC governments have justified the restructuring of the higher education sector based on speculation because the futures that they present are far from certain, and certainly not straightforward to achieve. President Ramaphosa has frequently highlighted the value that a 4IR and knowledge economy future is set to deliver if South Africa is prepared to fully participate in it. Speaking at the African Digital Economy Summit in 2019, he quoted a statistic from Accenture, a management consulting firm, which predicted that "digital technologies can generate R5 trillion in value for the South African industry and society in the next decade" and that "R1.4 trillion [in value] will be created in 2026 alone" (Shapshak, 2019). Similarly, when Ramaphosa gave a speech to a group of high school learners in the Eastern Cape, he noted that a local employability organisation (Harambee) had already identified 600 000 "high-skill digital job vacancies in the local economy, with the potential for 500 000 more by 2030" (Department of Science and Innovation, 2022). In order to justify the restructuring of higher education institutions to meet economic development imperatives that are underpinned by neoliberal logics, not only are the complexities of this endeavour (presented as a simple, linear transition from a commodities-based economy to a technologically advanced knowledge economy) downplayed but so too is the uncertainty of the future (Breeze & Taylor, 2018: 2; Breeze *et al*., 2019).

4.2.2. How are young people imagined within this future?

Authors have demonstrated how young people in South Africa (and elsewhere) tend to occupy contradictory positions in the public and political imaginary, as both a threat to stability and "key agents of social change"; as vandals and vanguards (De Lannoy & Langa, 2021: 5; Abbink & van Kessel, 2005). These contradictions and ambiguities, I argue, distract from young people's everyday efforts to forge their own futures, and consequently neglect

[11] It is also important to acknowledge that ideas about purposes of higher education are contested, and that students and staff in higher education all over the world, including in South Africa, are resisting the neoliberalisation of higher education.

to understand how best to support young people within their current circumstances, their everyday lives and in all of their heterogeneity. In this section, I consider the ways in which young people are constructed and imagined in relation to the government's visions for the future economy of South Africa. This construction is then contrasted with young people's realities in the next section to illustrate a disjuncture between government expectations and young people's experiences.

Young, highly educated people are essential to government's plans for economic growth. Therefore, interventions to raise the aspirations of young people are a central strand of South African education policy. One of the recommendations made in the National Youth Policy, for example, is for government to "implement career exhibitions that provide information on training opportunities for skills needed in the productive sectors of the economy" (DWYPD, 2019: 16). Higher education is also presented to young people and their families as the most promising route to achieving social mobility in South Africa. Speaking at a career development festival on Mandela Day (18 July), Dr Blade Nzimande, Minister of Higher Education and Training, repeated the words of former President Mandela in an attempt to inspire the young people that he was addressing (DHET, 2014: 15):

> "'Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, the son of a mine worker can become the head of a mine.'"

Officials from the DHET have constantly called on South Africans to "make education fashionable" as "only education would address economic inequality" (DHET, 2018: 5; IOL, 2011). However, young people's aspirations for higher education are already elevated. Research conducted on and with South African youth has demonstrated that their ambitions are to receive higher education training (De Lannoy *et al*., 2015; Walker, 2019, 2022). And the discontent expressed during the Fees Must Fall protests arose precisely out of the recognition of higher education as a route to a better life and the intense desire that young people had to participate in higher education. However, as I show below, young people's committed attempts to enter the higher education system are thwarted by various, enduring structural constraints, illustrating a gap (and various contradictions) between government's emphasis on aspirations and efforts to help young people realise them.

In the same speech given by Nzimande at the career development festival, he emphasised the fact that government has made plenty of opportunities for higher education learning available to young people, and that it was the responsibility of these young people to take advantage of them (DHET, 2014: 12):

> "Now I want to speak to every learner sitting in front of me: I have spoken about opportunities that you can pursue in post-school education and training. But you have to play your part. To succeed in life takes a lot of aspiration, responsibility and hard work. You have to aspire to reach the top rung in your life. Take responsibility for your own life and career choice. Work hard at school and make use of numerous opportunities such as the mentioned DHET initiatives and the opportunities presented here at the exhibition to get as much information as possible to make informed decisions about your career. Don't let opportunities like steam trains pass and you stay alone at the station. It's just empty tracks for the train of opportunity is gone. The more informed you are, the better your ability is to make choices and decisions in life. Work hard to achieve your goals in life. Use this moment and time wisely to gain important information about available career opportunities. Choose a career to realise your potential and help our country become a force to be reckoned with."

He goes on to say (DHET, 2014: 15):

> "At this time in our history, perhaps more so than ever before, young people must make the right decisions that will see them realise their potential and prosper."

There is a lot of emphasis on responsibility, agency and choice/decision-making. In order to fulfil the government's vision for future economic development, young people have to make the right decisions. By 2030, according to the National Development Plan, "many of the new graduates… must be in the critical skills categories, such as engineering, actuarial science, medicine, financial management, and chartered accountancy (NPC, 2012: 317). And the DHET plans to increase the numbers of graduates in engineering, natural and physical sciences, human health sciences, animal health sciences, and veterinary science up to specified targets by 2024 (DHET, 2019: 39). Therefore, young people are expected to aspire to enter higher education, work hard in order to gain access and be successful but also to choose STEM subjects (or subjects that are expected to impart them with the skills "to meet the present and future needs of the economy and society") (NPC, 2012: 296).

There are assumptions being made here about, firstly, the capacity of young people to "choose" and, secondly, the ways in which decisions about higher education are made. The underlying premise is that once young people are able to see and understand the value and promise (for themselves, their families and their country) of obtaining a higher education qualification in STEM, they will pursue those opportunities. Young people are constructed as rational, calculating beings who are weighing up the costs and benefits of a given route (Donnelly & Evans, 2016: 75). Their decisions and actions are constructed as the strategic fulfilment of prior intentions, rather than, for instance, based on what Johnson-Hanks (2005) refers to as "judicious opportunism". That is, that young people's actions are the result of seizing opportunities that open up rather than behaving in accordance with "homo economicus" and in line with the neo-classical principles of rational choice theory (Donnelly & Evans, 2016: 75). By constructing young people in this way, the minister individualises young people's (non-)participation in higher education. The government discourse, as it pertains to young people, glosses over the problems, and leaves the causes for unequal participation in higher education divorced from the structures that frame participation. They choose, instead, to focus on individual agency, resilience, responsibility and hard work. In the section that follows, I show, firstly, that because of structural constraints, young people find it very difficult to make education choices that are recognised by policy and government as the right ones. And, secondly, that young people's processes of higher education decision-making are complex, and are as much about material considerations as they are about emotions and relationality.

4.3. Higher education in everyday life

In this section, I discuss young people's challenging and circuitous (but ultimately successful) attempts to gain access to higher education. I apply the lens of the everyday to capture what is missed by the quantitative data, which only tells us who enrols for university but not how they managed to get there and why. In the quantitative data, the experiences of the young people that I interviewed would be counted as unproblematic or simply successful, even though they really struggled. Based on these young people's narratives about their attempts to gain access to higher education, I discuss the constraints that they faced and also highlight the complex emotional and relational ways in which decisions about higher education were made. In doing so, I add experiential evidence to literatures concerning access to higher

education in South Africa. The everyday is particularly useful because it provides a wider conceptual lens which captures the diverse contexts and frames of reference within which young people operate.

Funding, it could be argued, is the foremost reason that young people struggle to gain access to university. However, it isn't just the availability of funds that is an issue. Where funds are available, there are persistent issues around disbursement and the lack of awareness among those young people who would need this support the most. It was precisely these issues that sparked the 2015/16 student protests on university campuses across the country. National budget cuts to the higher education sector have led to shortfalls in student funding from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS). During a briefing to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Higher Education, Masile Ramorwesi, acting CEO of NSFAS, revealed that (Damons, 2023):

> "Based on the calculations of the 10% reduction in university funding from National Treasury's Medium Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS), 87,712 students will be left unfunded in the 2024 academic period. This will increase to 120,976 in the 2024/25 academic year."

In addition to these fiscal challenges, NSFAS has long been in administrative crisis – which has had devastating impacts on students and young people seeking to enter higher education (Bakharia, 2023). In 2024, over a month into the academic year, students and hopeful young people are experiencing what Nomfundo experienced in 2017. First time entrants are still waiting to hear whether their applications for funding have been successful, while enrolled and returning students had still not received their living and school allowance payments from NSFAS (News24, 2024). This makes it difficult (and, for many, impossible) to buy food and to pay rent, putting them at risk of being evicted. Sibahle (27 year-old woman), who graduated from the University of Johannesburg engineering faculty in 2019, was not able to cope with a full course load because she didn't have her basic needs met as a student:

> "There were times when I actually couldn't survive. Because when I got [to UJ], NSFAS wasn't sponsoring people with money for food at the time. So, I would just decide that this semester, I will just do three modules because the capacity of a mind of a student is according to their health. If your mind is okay, then you

> will perform okay. Some of the years, I wasn't okay… When NSFAS started to support me, then I started putting all of my modules together."

In response to these issues, Nzimande said the following during a media conference in 2021 (South African Government, 2021):

> "As many of you know by now, the National Student Financial Aid Scheme has not yet been able to confirm funding eligibility for first-time entering students wishing to study in public universities in 2021. I am aware that this is causing great anxiety for prospective students and their families… Government remains committed to ensuring that deserving students are supported through higher education… I applaud the many students who have adapted to these difficult circumstances, and developed new ways of learning and coping."

Lerato (24), a female analytical chemistry graduate from Tshwane University of Technology, faced similar funding challenges to Nomfundo, Sibahle and other young people, leading her along a twisting and roundabout way to where she eventually graduated with a National Diploma. During high school, she was offered an opportunity to complete her higher education studies overseas but was unable to accept it:

> "And from knowing my background and where I come from, I knew my mom would not survive to send me money over that side because they said they were gonna cover certain costs and then I had to cover other costs. I knew that my family won't be able to cover those costs. I had to make a choice to let that pass."

But even then, Lerato continued to face funding challenges locally. She told me that at the time, she "didn't know about NSFAS". She enrolled in a nearby college that her parents could afford, where she completed three post-school certificates in chemical engineering over the course of a year:

> After I made the decision not to go to Germany, I did a late application at the University of Free State [UFS] to do Agricultural Science. But registration was R16 000, if I'm not mistaken. Because I didn't have any funding, I had to pay that amount for me to register. My parents didn't have any money for me to register. That's why I decided to go to a college, where I paid R500 registration."

Of course, these young people, and the thousands of others like them, have displayed the capacity to be creative, adaptive and resilient. However, the minister's remarks amount to a romanticisation of these qualities, in ways that may allow the government to escape

accountability, all while ignoring the cruelty that is accompanied by the state of student funding: the time spent waiting, the stress, having to devise new plans on the spot and the dashing of hopes.

Another constraint that these young people faced, as articulated by Zama (24, female, UJ Finance graduate), was related to the lack of information:

> "It's [high school] in the rural areas. Nothing much happens here. There's limited opportunities and information in terms of what you can do after school."

Research has shown that young people, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds attending quintile one to three schools[12], do not have the information that they need to make informed choices about universities and careers (De Lannoy *et al*., 2015; Graham *et al*., 2019; Swanson, 2013; Walker, 2019). Family members who have experienced higher education can transmit the kind of cultural capital and knowledge of additional processes that can facilitate a smooth transition to higher education (Holton & Riley, 2013: 66). However, the vast majority of the young people interviewed for this research are the first in their families to go to university. And many of them have transitioned from schools where there is little to no (formal) guidance on university applications and potential career paths, where, as Walker (2019) illustrates in her own work, teachers may choose to focus only on the most promising learners or focus only on ensuring that these young people pass their matric exams. Therefore, students lack both "hot knowledge", which is gained from direct experiences (i.e.: knowing someone who has been to university) as well as "cold [or official] knowledge", which can be gained from reading the university prospectus, for example (Martinez-Vargas *et al*., 2020: 428; Walker & Mkwanazi, 2015: 43). Lerato wanted to work in a lab, but without the right information, she enrolled in chemical engineering courses:

> "I thought maybe to be a chemical engineer you are going to work in a lab. I wanted to work in a lab. I have a love for chemistry. But during the course, I saw they were only talking about plants. They are never talking about what's in a lab. So I went to one of my lecturers and asked her 'I thought we are going to work in the lab and wear a lab coat because that's what I want'. She told me, 'No, you are doing the wrong course. You have to do analytical chemistry'. I didn't know

[12] South Africa has a quintile ranking mechanism to address equity in schools, from quintile one to quintile five. Quintile one schools cater to the poorest 20% of learners and quintile five the least poorest 20%.

> anything about analytical chemistry. But after that, I did my research and that's where I decided to do it."

Nomfundo faced similar challenges in the face of teacher and family disapproval for the area of study that she had initially chosen for herself:

> "At home, back in the rural areas, you're not really well-informed about these things. They would say, 'Why do you wanna do [radiography]? How are you gonna get a job? At least engineers get jobs,' and what not."

In Nhlanhla's (30, male Wits engineering graduate) case, he demonstrated that teachers can also choose to share or withhold guidance or information based on their own perceptions of whether a student might succeed. But Nhlanhla decided to seek out this information on his own:

> "Where I come from, I think there's a few people who said 'Just don't go to Wits'. Because there's a stigma that it's difficult, you won't-- they won't accept you. Even for the teachers, they were gonna give you university forms for other institutions, but for Wits they won't. So I decided to apply in secret, without telling anyone to discourage me."

The capacity of higher education institutions to absorb all of the learners that are eligible to study on their campuses also featured as a constraint that young people faced in attempt to transition from school to university. As I explained in Chapter One, the number of admissions places that are available are consistently below the places that are demanded by young people leaving matric. In 2024, it was reported that Wits University received 100 000 applications for 6 000 available places for first-year students (Le Roux, 2024). In 2023, UKZN received 250 000 applications for 8 500 places, while UCT received 51 000 for 4 200 (Marriah-Maharaj, 2023). The process for applying to university starts in grade eleven, about two years before young people intend to enrol (although it could also be argued that the process starts when young people are in grade nine and choosing their elective subjects)[13]. However, it is not until matriculants have their final exam results that they can take up any offers that they have received from the university applications that they made. Due to the

[13] In grade nine, learners are required to choose the subjects that they will study from grade ten to twelve (matric). They are required to study four core subjects (two languages, mathematics and life orientation) and can choose between three to five additional subjects that they would like to study, if those subjects are taught in their particular high school. These include subjects such as biology, business studies, history, French and physical science.

high demand for places to study, some universities operate a "first come, first serve" registration system, so that even if someone has received conditional acceptance and has met the condition in their final exams, they would not be able to enrol into the class if it is full by the time that they get to the front of the registration queue, as was the case with Nsindiso (25, female, DUT Biotechnology graduate):

> "I was not rejected in UKZN but the spaces that I applied for were full. I had to be a walk-in at DUT and apply for a course that I saw. I didn't even know what biotechnology was. I just applied for that course and waited for a call."

Lerato was in a similar position after she decided to forgo the opportunity to study abroad. She had to submit a "walk-in application", which left her with very little options for what to study:

> "During late application, you just want to be at university. So every course that is available, you take it. The courses that were available were about law and commerce. For us who did science at school, it was geography and agriculture. I don't remember the third one. So I decided to choose agriculture, and I was like 'I'll change the course when I'm already enrolled in the university."

However, there are also some programmes, like architecture, which admit a number of students each year that is significantly lower than other academic programmes. Therefore, the chances of acceptance are low. However, as Semakaleng (27, female, UP Engineering graduate) points out below, discriminatory admissions practices can mean that students from particular backgrounds face even greater disadvantage:

> "Funny enough, [engineering] was not my first choice… When I applied to university, my first choice was landscape architecture. I wanted to go into architecture but it was— well, their reason for not taking me was that the space was limited. I still met the requirements but in UP [University of Pretoria] architecture is still a predominantly white school."

These structural constraints have a significant effect on young people's ability to exercise agency. Urging young people to make the right choices in this context is futile, because they are constrained to doing what they *can* instead of what they want to – be it studying engineering, as the government encourages them to do, or something else. However, even though young people's ability to choose is more restrained than government discourses suggest, young people are still making decisions about their lives, education, and careers.

And while the practical, material, and monetary aspects of their potential pathways are considered, this is not the only lens through which young people make and rationalise their decisions. Nomfundo, for example, had her mind set on enrolling at Wits, before her plans were devastated by NSFAS, because of the reputation of the university as both prestigious and rigorous:

> "Wits is a good school compared to DUT or Mangosuthu. And at Wits, I was gonna do a BSc and not a National Diploma."

However, in the end, she made a decision on which university to attend based on a number of factors, including where she could afford to study, how far she would be from her family and whether she would feel safe. It is the everyday, as in, the emotional, the psychological and the relational, therefore, that gives credence to the ways in which possible education futures are interpreted (Finn, 2017: 754).

Emotions and personal capabilities play a significant role in decisions about the kinds of studies that young people consider pursuing. Lerato had an exuberant passion for chemistry. And as a result, she made every decision related to her higher education based on whether or not she would be able to spend the day in a lab coat, performing various experiments:

> "I love chemistry – from high school. You know we did physical science? So, I only passed the chemistry side. I only understood the chemistry side and not the physics sides one. So that's why I love doing chemistry. At home, I would love to make experiments – maybe search experiments on Google then perform them. That's where I saw that this is the path I have to take."

Nhlanhla similarly took stock of both his passions and what he was good at in making decisions about education:

> "I actually wanted to go for civil [engineering]. But for civil, there was the drawing part which I didn't like because you have to do drawings and stuff. It was a bit challenging for me. That's why I opted for mining because there's not a lot of drawings there – straightforward. And then the reason I did mining is because of my father – because he used to work at Harmony Gold. He used to build… *network interruption* I was actually fascinated by them. How did it come about? The formations and stuff. And that's why I opted for mining."

The government's language of choices and playing one's part to achieve the tech-industrial dream might influence us to believe that the formation of aspirations is an individual pursuit, but this is never the case (Appadurai, 2004: 67; Walker & Mkwanazi, 2015: 44) – as Nhlanhla's quote demonstrate. Vhonani and Siba were similarly influenced by particular encounters with, in the case of Vhonani, a mentor, and in the case of Siba, his father, to pursue the programmes from which they ended up graduating:

> "There is this other friend of mine, he was my mentor. He works at the municipality and told me that he did [a diploma in] administration. So when I finished matric, I said, 'No, I want to be like you'. Because he is the person helping the community in many ways." (Vhonani, 27, male, UNIVEN Administration graduate)

> "[My dad] retired on the late 90s. School wasn't really his thing. But then he was very, very—I think his education was more from like oral stuff, oral traditions. He loved history… He was the one who sort of got me into history. A lot of my uncles were people who loved history and politics… From a young age, they sort of conscientized us in that history is important. You know people are always saying that it's important to know your history and everything. I took that very seriously. That was a huge motivating factor for me to study history. Because when I went to CTI [College] to study business, I was just trying to follow a family trend where everyone is in finance. And it really wasn't my passion." (Siba, 27, male, NWU History graduate)

And finally, there were a variety of factors that shaped decision-making that were not directly or solely related to education and career. For instance, Madumelane (27, female, UJ Construction graduate) factored into her decision-making having responsibility for a young child. And so quickly ruled out the possibility (or desirability) of studying at a university that was often disrupted by student protests:

> "I didn't apply to TUT because the previous year, they had so many strikes. So I thought I wouldn't be able to balance school [and] being at home with a child while there are so many strikes. I wanted to go to a new environment, learn new ways of life and explore."

For Felicia and Athi, they had personal desires to experience life elsewhere. For many (middle class), going away to university and being away from parents and family is a key part of the experience and journey to adulthood (Donnelly & Evans, 2016; Nakassis, 2014). There is a rich body of literature on student mobilities in the UK, in which authors argue that emotional attachments to place lead "non-traditional" students to enrolling in universities

that are closer to home (Brown, 2011; Donnelly & Evans, 2016; Holton & Riley, 2013). In my study, I have found that these young people, and especially women, voiced a desire to be somewhere else:

> "My reason [for choosing CPUT] is funny… I wanted to be in Cape Town. I didn't want to be in the Eastern Cape because I've always been there. I grew up there. I did my primary there, my high school there. I wanted a new province – a new environment." (Athi, 27, female CPUT Biotechnology graduate)

> "…you are at home, and all you want is freedom. So, they tell you that at university, you'll have your freedom. You'll be staying without parents. So, it will be all good." (Felicia, 24, female UL chemistry graduate)

Nomfundo would have moved from KZN to Gauteng had her NSFAS application been approved on time. Instead, she settled on enrolling at DUT because it was closer to her family, who could provide her with material support while she lived through the precarity induced by NSFAS. Even though she got accepted to study at Mangosuthu University, she chose not to accept the offer because:

> "Mangosuthu is in the suburbs in Umlazi. It's a very dangerous place to be. The crime and everything there. It was a no-no for me. I was scared."

This serves as an example of the "practical knowledges" (Hall, 2019b: 30) of everyday life that can be significant to shaping experiences and actions. And also illustrates that economic outcomes are far from being the dimension through which young people evaluate the higher education landscape.

4.4. Education is the key to success (in a way)

Towards the end of the interview, I asked participants how they felt about university education (their own and in general) and whether they would encourage others to strive to go to university after high school. This was Nomfundo's response:

> "I know that not everything is gonna happen at my pace. The fact that God allowed me to go to university, the fact the God allowed me to excel at university means that He has a plan for me… I regret [going to university]. Even the experience at university, I'm happy. You meet friends there that become your family. So I'm happy about everything honestly. I don't regret it."

Later, she added:

> "[Education] is important. But what I've also realised is that it has to be education plus connections *laughs out loud*."

And this was Lerato's response:

> "Ja, education is… *laughs out loud*. It's fifty-fifty. Education is the key to success but sometimes education it's important if it depends on who you know… I would say go to university, go study, go get that diploma. But at least have a back-up. At least have a business or something that you're gonna get money from while studying. Don't depend only on education."

In this section, I consider how these young people evaluated university education in light of its failure to deliver the kinds of jobs and, as a result, the kinds of lives that they were promised and had imagined. Demerath (1999) studies the perceptions of formal education among villagers in Papua New Guinea. He found that people who graduated from secondary school were unable to secure the "cash employment" expected as educated individuals. This caused them to feel frustrated and embarrassed. And a result, Demerath (1999) notes that the villagers began to question the value of investing in education and highlights widespread ambivalence about the utility of formal education among the locals. They valued formal education primarily for the role that it played in creating social relationships with peers. His work demonstrates how local understandings of education can change when the promises that are made, based on the links between education and employment, go unfulfilled (Demerath, 1999). In a similar vein, Jeffrey *et al*. (2008) explore how young men in India respond to educated unemployment, and how they imagine education given their circumstances. The authors find that these young men reinvest in notions of education as social improvement, by creating a type of public culture of educational distinction (Jeffrey *et al*., 2008). To create this culture, the young men emphasised differences in speech, clothing, manners and the ability to adapt between themselves and uneducated men (Jeffrey *et al*., 2008: 68). My own discussion adds to this literature by illustrating how South African conceptions of higher education may have changed among these young people.

Amongst the interviewees, Nsindiso felt the strongest about university education having been a waste of time and something that she regretted doing:

> "I wish I was told early that I should have just started my business. Being a graduate in South Africa is not a blessing, it's a curse. Because you have this qualification now, and nothing else. You're just sitting at home, equal to the person who has not graduated. I'm just a graduate by name but nothing else shows that I am a graduate. If I walk on the road, then I'm just the same like everybody else. I don't have anything to show for it… I would have preferred that my mom gave me that money to invest in something that would have yielded me tangible dividends in the end… I always imagine where I would be if I started [investing] earlier."

In most interviews, discussions about the value of education started with these young people proclaiming, like Nsindiso, that they regretted going to university and that they felt that education was useless. But when I continued to probe, they started to highlight the ways in which they thought that education was valuable. But on the whole, they felt ambivalent and conflicted about higher education. There were three main ways in which young people spoke about the utility and value of higher education. First, they emphasised that even though it hadn't led to a job, they gained valuable skills (i.e.: flexibility, as Madumelane highlights below) and learned a lot about themselves and about life and the world. These were attributes which they felt distinguished them from people who don't have a university education. And they were also attributes that were invaluable because they could not be taken away from them. Below are examples of how young people evaluated higher education in this way:

> "[University] will better you as an individual. But it will not guarantee you a space in the economy. Being educated, being knowledgeable about certain aspects of life and being able to have a certain degree of knowledge about certain things betters you as an individual. When you know that 'I can actually know these things to this extent', it makes you feel good about yourself." (Neo, 24 female VUT Chemistry graduate)

> "It would make it broad for me to say education is not the key. It is. It educates you, in a way, to handle life situations. Not only that, your qualifications come with you working a certain job. But if other opportunities were there, would you be able to overtake them and partake in something else that you didn't study for? If someone were to ask me if going to university is the right thing, I would say yes. Cause there's a lot that I learnt at university. Not in classes, but with people. You learn how to communicate with people, how to see people, how to see the world as it is." (Madumelane, 27 female UJ Construction graduate)

> "It's important because it's beyond just academics. I've learned a lot about how I view life as a whole." (Tumelo, 26 male UJ Engineering graduate)

> "[Going to university says that you are enabled in your mind to think further – to analyse, to critically think. Because I can see, from my high school to university level, there has been a shift in the way that I think, meaning that I have gained knowledge. I have gained understanding and gained more wisdom in the things that I am doing." (Refilwe, 24 male UP Politics graduate)

Perhaps, like the young people in Jeffrey *et al*.'s study (2008) of unemployed graduates in north India, the reluctance to denounce the value of education entirely is an attempt to construct new frameworks for social respect and distinction when they don't have the opportunities to gain these attributes from graduate employment.

Second, these young people maintained that education was only useful or valuable in relation to some other condition being met, and this was usually having "a connection" or studying the "right" academic course. Neo, for instance, believes that:

> "In South Africa, being a graduate, I really feel like it doesn't do anything for you. I feel like in South Africa nowadays, for you to get anywhere, you need to have connections. Connections are your biggest stepping stone. University might get you to the door, but connections literally put you by the table."

On LinkedIn, Felicia reposted the following post from a "workplace influencer", which received substantial engagement, where all but one of the commenters agreed with the original post:

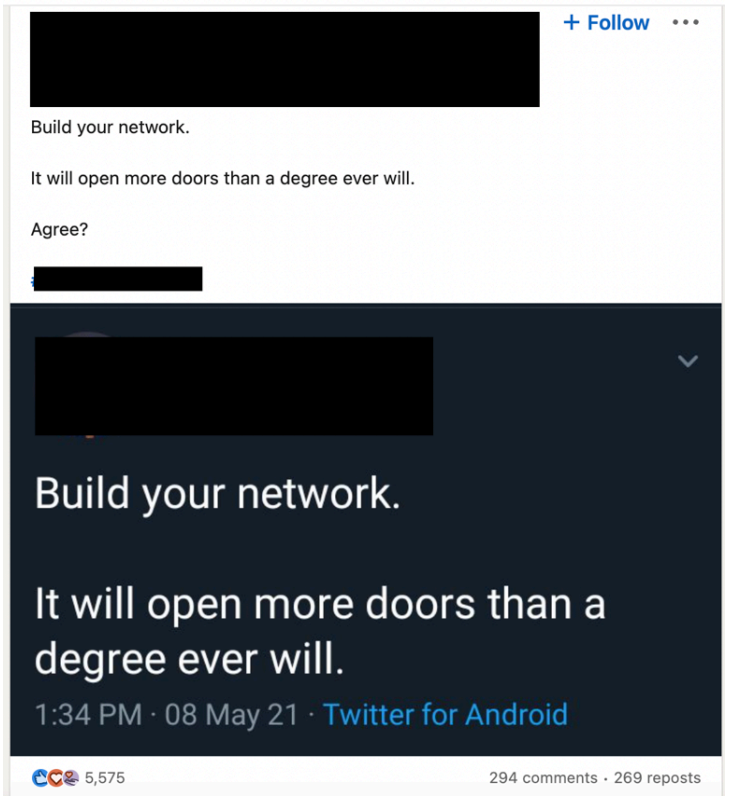


Figure 4: Screenshot of shared post from LinkedIn

And similarly, Athi believed that education was still important and useful, but only if one studies the "right" subject. Based on her experience as a biotechnology graduate, she said that she would advise her younger sister, who was still in high school at the time, to study something else:

> "I'd advise her to go to health… I don't want her to do science. Really, I don't want her to do science. So I've been talking to her that maybe she can consider something that is in the health sciences, like pharmacy, nursing. The things that are in demand now. And the things that you know you are gonna graduate and get a job immediately… I will keep on talking to her to go with the route of health sciences." (Athi, 27, female, CPUT Biotechnology graduate)

But for some graduates, it wasn't just their ability to make the right connections and to choose the right degrees that determined whether their education would work for them (as in, help them to find jobs), but they argue, like Sibahle does below, that it depends on the state of South Africa, and employers' (in the private sector and government) attitudes towards university educated youth:

> "In South Africa, [education] no longer works. Even if you can study to whatever level. I'm sure in South Africa, if you have a PhD, they're gonna say they can't pay you or they can't afford you… I don't see them taking people who are educated seriously." (Sibahle, 27, female, UJ Engineering graduate)

Using language that is used by Paiva (2021) to discuss the educational aspirations of young people in Chile, I argue that, unlike the government, who discuss education and work in the "future perfect" (a linguistic tense in which the outcome that is desired will certainly be achieved, i.e.: if you graduate from university you will get a job), young people understand education in the "future conditional" (as in, they understand the promises of education to be contingent on factors such as whether your field of study is in demand or whether you have the social capital necessary to secure a job in your field). It is worth noting, however, the ways in which government narratives are rejected based on personal experience. The government has repeatedly called for more STEM graduates, and Athi is one of them. But, because of her experience, she doesn't believe that science is a useful/valuable qualification because she has failed to find work using her qualification.

And finally, young people found education valuable insofar as it allowed them to seize opportunities quickly if/when they arose because they would already have the qualifications that would be required by those opportunities. For example, Refilwe explained:

> "The reason why I am saying that it's good is because I don't know where my opportunity will come from. It might not be from the vacancies that I apply at, but it can be a company that can just arrive from anywhere or if there's just a workshop nearby and I attend, they say we are looking for graduates. Since I have that certificate, it will be easier for me to produce it. And I can be employed anywhere, any time." (Refilwe, 24, male, UP Politics graduate)

This conceptualisation of higher education is reminiscent of Ludwig's (2017) discussion of "*la chance*", an abstract and complex phenomenon that young Malian graduates refer to constantly as they attempt to find work. "*La chance*" (defined as opportunities, chances, serendipity, good fortune) is a phenomenon that appears suddenly and needs to be identified by an individual who is prepared to seize it (Ludwig, 2017: 70). In this case, for young people like Refilwe, going to university can be understood as a preparing for "*la chance*" and the degree as a tool that will enable them to seize "*la chance*" *when* it appears (because Refilwe is certain that an opportunity will come).

What this section begins to illustrate is that governments are not the only actors engaged in processes of futuring (van Wolputte *et al*., 2022), a discussion which I pick up in Chapter Five. In this instance, it is both past experiences, defined at least partly by struggle, and the continuous failure of particular kinds of futures to materialise, that has led to re-imaginings of education which may have an impact on how these young people choose to engage and participate in higher education in the future.

4.5. Educated yet still unemployed

> "So, I have been at home for almost a year now. And I have people telling me that I've chosen the wrong career, wasted a lot of time and money studying to end up back at home with a degree and unemployed. I won't lie, being unemployed for so long with no income is depressing. I've sent out way too many applications and I've talked to people, but it's just not happening. But I believe that this is just a phase. It will pass. The best is yet to come. I just can't wait to prove those people wrong about a career in construction." (Lizwi, 26, male, Wits Construction graduate)

In the context of Botswana, Livingston (2009) investigates the increased rates of suicide among the country's middle class in order to reflect on the social dimensions of capitalistic risk and investment. She shows how, in Botswana, people have to position themselves as "someone with means" if they are to, in fact, become a person with means, who is listened to and taken seriously (Livingston, 2009: 662). To achieve this, many young people employ strategies that proximate gambling, like borrowing money against expected future income. But when the investment threatens to collapse, when the debts can't be repaid and luxury cars are at risk of being repossessed, "it creates desperation so palpable and painful that it opens up the possibility of suicide" (Livingston, 2009: 671).

Like the consumer goods purchased to create the veneer of middle-classness in Botswana, investment in higher education (and its failure to deliver what has been promised) has a significant impact on how post-university unemployment is experienced, especially emotionally. On the one hand, as I have discussed in Chapter Two, the process of schooling and certain pedagogical methods (i.e.: see Clegg, 2010) instil, in young people, a progressive developmentalist sense of time, in which young people expect continuous, linear progress

throughout their lives (Mains, 2011). On the other hand, education can also (re)configure people's aspirations. For example, Semakaleng (27, female, UP Engineering graduate) recalls that her and her peers were told that they were the "cream of the crop":

> "… when we started out, anyone that studied engineering will tell you they were told that you're guaranteed a job, you're going to be earning a lot of money."

When education, for young people like Nomfundo, Lerato and Lizwi, is constructed as an investment with returns that guarantee certain kinds of employment and a level of economic status, they do everything that they can to invest in that future – through the multitude of challenges and structural constraints, as I have demonstrated. However, this is done with an understanding that that promise will be fulfilled. Therefore, when it's not, it is devastating, and, as Lizwi discusses above, constitutes a kind of public humiliation. The period of struggling to get somewhere appears to be one that is never-ending for this group of young people. This has a significant impact on how graduate unemployment is experienced in everyday life, as the following chapters will demonstrate.

4.6. Conclusion

This chapter constitutes a way of thinking about unemployment experiences as informed by higher education. While ordinary people might be future-makers, they also form part of wider processes of futuring, where practices and knowledge are embedded in forms of governing that privilege some representations of "the future" over others. In this chapter, I have considered how grand narratives of "the future", rendered visible through state policy, strategies and official engagements with the public, relate to the ordinary, everyday experiences and imaginations of young people as they attempt to forge further education and career pathways. A focus on the young people's experiences shows that government narratives conceal the messiness of everyday life and practices that are inherent to navigating an uneven educational field. And that even where government discourses are adopted by young people, particularly as they relate to the importance of STEM, there are significant structural barriers which prevent them from realising what the government expects them to do. In the first section of this chapter, I have shown how government's process of futuring is centred on anticipations regarding the 4IR and a growing knowledge economy, and that education and a skilled workforce are central to achieving success in that

vision of the future. The neoliberalisation of the higher education sector is justified by the supposed benefits that will be brought by technological transformation – a future which is uncertain (even though the government presents it to us as though it is). I discussed the ways in which young people are constructed as, and expected to be, good neoliberal subjects who are responsible for forging a prosperous life for themselves in this version of the future. But in the second section, I show, first, the challenging and circuitous routes to higher education that young people have to take as a result of neoliberal governance (cuts to higher education funding) as well as corruption and maladministration. But I also show that young people are more complex than rational, calculating neoliberal subjects, and that their education and career trajectories are formed as much through the desire to get a good job as they are through social and relational interactions. In the third section, I turn to investigate how young people view the utility and value of education after it had failed to deliver on the jobs and the lives that they had been promised and expected. I find that although young people expressed that they were angry and regretted going to university, further probing revealed that they were unwilling to express wholesale disapproval of education. In fact, they spoke about the different in ways (outside of employment) that they thought education was valuable and also described higher education qualifications as something that was valuable *if* it was combined with other enabling factors (such as social capital, or a focus on STEM/skills that were in demand) – although there continues to be uncertainty or no consensus regarding what these skills are exactly, especially among youth who do graduate in STEM but still struggle to find work. And finally, I reflected briefly on what it means to go through education and then struggle to find work after education, and how that has a significant bearing on how they experience everyday life as unemployed graduates.

This chapter has contributed to broader literature on the geographies of higher education, especially as it responds to calls for the foregrounding of young people's voices in research about education, and especially increasing the perspectives of those from the global South. I have also made contributions to the literature on access to education in South Africa by complicating the "access/no access" binary through detailing the constraints that young people continue to face in their attempts to enter higher education institutions. These findings have important implications at the level of higher education policy and practice.

There are longstanding issues, including access funding, the lack of information and career guidance and limited opportunities for university education which, as this chapter has demonstrated, continue to warrant urgent attention. However, the discussions in which I illustrate the ways in which young people exercise their (limited) agency provide insight into how young people may be supported in their transition from school to university in ways that are meaningful and important to them. For example, for young people who would like to use their higher education experience as an opportunity to live in another part of the country, away from their families, it is essential to ensure that there are structures in place to support this, such as secure and affordable accommodation, sufficient pastoral support and ensuring that young people have the financial means to travel home frequently, should they wish to do so. All aspects of young people's lives matter in their higher education and career journeys.

5 Labouring towards multiple futures: everyday processes of futuring

5.1. Introduction

Sibahle was born and raised in a township in KwaZulu-Natal, where she was currently living with her mother when I met her. In 2013, she left home to pursue her studies in Industrial Engineering at the University Johannesburg. When we met online in 2021, she had been back at home for two years while she was looking for a job. She described this as a time that had its ups and downs emotionally:

> "Some days I feel depressed and stuck. Some days I feel alive. Some days I feel okay and self-motivated. If I don't use this situation as an escape to God or serving God or being in church, I think I would have died by now because it's crazy… When I am in the spirit, that's better than being in the physical because it's easier."

When I asked her about the future, she appeared to have a good grasp on it – she knew exactly where she was headed and what she wanted:

> "I want to be a principal engineer somewhere… I will say I will be a qualified engineer and, probably, I will have come back to SA from another country. I will come back if SA won't turn to be Zimbabwe. I wanna own land and do something agricultural and build my house there in the rurals. Townships are expensive."

Studies on youth in waithood tend to focus on urban imaginations, revolving around life in the city (Abebe, 2020). But Sibahle was looking forward to a future life in the rural areas. Minutes after sharing this vision for her life, however, she expressed that she was feeling despondent about the future, and was longing for a sign that things might change:

> "For now, I feel discouraged. I don't wanna lie to you. I feel like I don't understand what's happening. Maybe if something that can happen that is nice, I will be encouraged and happy and see where I am going."

In this chapter, I investigate how the future is engaged by ordinary people. In particular, I ask two questions. First, I ask how, despite repeated disappointment and living within the context of radical uncertainty, young people managed to hold on to a sense of the future. And second, under the themes of work, entrepreneurship and migration (which are themes that emerged from analysing the empirical data), I discuss the kinds of futures that these

young people were imagining and attempting to mobilise under these conditions. I argue that by paying attention to how the future figures in the everyday lives of unemployed graduates, we can better understand how they cope with and navigate their circumstances in the present. This discussion unfolds over two sections, where each section answers the questions that I have set out above. But before I address these questions, I use the rest of the introduction to resume telling Sibahle's story, which illustrates the themes that are explored in the rest of this chapter.

It became clear that Sibahle was not, like many other authors have illustrated about youth in similar situations of waithood elsewhere (i.e.: Honwana, 2012), just idly waiting for opportunities to emerge, as this description of her typical day shows:

> "I am forever busy. When I wake up, it's just me reading the word and praying. Then from there, it's cleaning the house… Then I see what is it that needs to be done at school. Then from there I will cook for the house. And if it's Wednesday, Friday or Sunday, I go to church."

A common feature of everyday life among the women that I interviewed was completing household chores – something that none of the men mentioned when they spoke about what a typical day looks like for them. In addition to household work, Sibahle was studying for an Advanced Diploma in Quality Assurance in order to boost her credentials, but also to pass what felt like endless time in a meaningful and productive way. Sibahle was constantly engaged in various affective, mental and physical labours in order to make her visions of the future a reality or to keep a sense of the future alive. Practicing her religion was one of those labours. But what Sibahle doesn't mention in the above quote, are the hours that she spends imagining, planning, researching and trying to create a variety of opportunities. She spent a lot of time and energy looking for a job:

> "If I'm investing my whole entire time, I can apply for four or five [jobs in a day]. Sometimes you go crazy, you get depressed because you're focusing on this thing."

Sibahle, like many other graduates, applied for the majority (or all) of her jobs online. But with a lack of information and connections and the introduction of new technologies, the job-searching landscape can be confusing:

> "I've been looking for a job and looking for a job is depressing and tiring because I've done a lot of things when it comes to job searching and you find out new things everyday. New CVs, new that and that. I started last year applying with just my CV and my knowledge of CV and stuff that I did from the templates that I got from Windows. But as I go forward, people started telling me about ATS system CV."

Anxieties about applicant tracking systems (ATS) were prevalent among the young people that I interviewed. The use of ATS to "streamline" the hiring process has grown exponentially over the years (The Brain Hawk Consultant, 2023). It's a software that companies use to parse, sort and rank applicants based on an ideal profile that the software has created (The Brain Hawk Consultant, 2023). As a result, young people spent a lot of time trying to figure out how to prevent the software from automatically rejecting their applications. This involved experimenting with CV design, guessing, doing research, asking for advice or, for others, paying "unemployment experts" (Sheehan, 2021) to ensure that their CVs are "ATS compliant". Despite their efforts, Sibahle and many others continued to receive rejection emails or not hear back from the recruiters at all. Sibahle was eager to speak to a human in order to make her case for employment:

> "It's not easy to score an interview. It's like a dream. You'll even think you've got a job but you've just got an interview."

But it wasn't just a job that Sibahle was pursuing. Following repeated disappointment, she started to pursue alternative viable futures. She thought about ways in which she could become an entrepreneur:

> "I am still searching for businesses that I can venture into in order to get an income. I wanted to do this other one of selling hair products because they fetch them from Botswana and I wanted the original. I wanted to sell it. I'm not finding the original and I don't wanna sell the fake products 'cause it's gonna be sensitive on other people's skin. There are so many things that I'm thinking of but I don't have the money to start them."

And she also thought about ways that she could find opportunities abroad, in China, India or the U.S.:

> "I've been Googling. That's what I'm busy with. I'm forever Googling things 'cause right now I want to go study outside [in] the world because I've been

> Googling about India scholarships… I'm busy having a lot of options on my mind. And I want to do the TOEFL certificate for China. And then, I want to have someone who I know who's in China. I don't wanna go to a place where I don't have someone that I know in that place. Because it's not safe. I don't wanna be stolen by someone… I even wanted to do the U.S. thing where you go and be an *au pair*."

When life in South Africa showed no signs of progress, she started to look elsewhere for opportunities to study or work. These considerations, especially of moving to China to teach English as a foreign language, were partly informed by witnessing other young South Africans on social media make a life for themselves abroad:

> "There are people that you see on social media that say that they are in China and then I will actually inbox them and ask them about China. I think last year, I started hearing about it. I've known about it but I never thought it was possible. I've never been so curious to know because my focus was just where I was. Now, the more situations come to life, I would be like, okay, maybe if I can go to China. I'm trying hard to find solutions since right now I am applying for jobs and getting rejections."

She also added what she had learned about the benefits of moving:

> "… it's double the money that teachers earn here in South Africa. Teachers can earn R30 000 in China and R15 000 in South Africa. Why should I study a degree of teaching in South Africa while I'm gonna still get paid R15 000? It doesn't make sense. You can go to China, get paid that double and the come back to South Africa."

While she was making these plans and imagining alternative futures, she was often unable to mobilise these visions and desires:

> "I'm not in any steps. 'Cause what hinders me is the process of money. I don't have money to do a passport or to move around. That's what keeps my things stagnant."

But in the midst of these struggles, Sibahle remained hopeful:

> "I believe in just applying your mind and God will be your helping hand."

In what follows, I examine everyday processes of futuring. This chapter adds to the literature by Wool & Livingston (2017: 8) and Collard (2021), which ask how people keep going "amid the damage" in their day-to-day lives. Like Sibahle, the young people that I interviewed shared that over weeks or even within a day, they went back and forth between feelings of

hope and feelings of hopelessness (and even, as in the case of one participant, suicide). But somehow, they seemed to always be able to bring themselves back to feeling hopeful. Although people's visions of a good life vary across culture, time and space, the chapter also looks at the particular futures that these young people were imagining and labouring to bring about. The chapter demonstrates that, as discussed in Chapter Two, these futures are not rigid: they are continuously being (re)shaped by past and present experiences, as everyday contact with peers, global flows of information and culture online expands, contracts and generally reworks conceptions of what's possible. The chapter also demonstrates the various ways in which the future is engaged in the present through imagination, calculation and practice as multiple futures and temporalities develop simultaneously.

5.2. "Never is a man more active than when he does nothing"[14]: the work of holding on

In literatures that examine how unemployed young Africans "get by", they tend to emphasise the range of economic activities that those young people are engaged in (Di Nunzio, 2012; Thieme, 2017). However, by foregrounding economic strategies for survival, especially in this context, where young people have very few opportunities for engaging in economic strategies (see Chapter One), we risk obscuring the variety of (temporal) practices that youth engage in to sustain themselves psychically and emotionally, and in ways that propel them towards certain desired or anticipated futures. I suggest that it is through consuming and creating motivational continent (online and offline) as well as practising (Pentecostal) Christianity that young people are able to sustain a sense of some future(s). I understand these practices of holding on as labour.

Making the distinction between "work" and "labour" is helpful for understanding the everyday lives of the young people in this study. Arendt (1958: 136) uses the word "work" to refer to the activities that people perform in order to produce "objects for use", where these objects "possess the durability Locke needed for the establishment of property, [and] the 'value' Adam Smith needed for the exchange market". In other words, work can be understood as the type of employment that these young people spent all day looking for but were struggling to secure. "Labour", on the other hand:

[14] Cato, quoted in Standing (2013: 2)

> produces whatever "is meant to be fed into the human life process almost immediately, and this consumption, regenerating the life process, produces – or rather, reproduces – new 'labor power' needed for further sustenance of the body" (Arendt, 1958: 99)

Standing (2013) makes the same distinction in an article about the inequality of control over time under contemporary capitalism[15]. Work involves doing tasks for income, whereas labour consists of activities around the home, with family, friends and intimate others – it is crucial for nourishing "civic friendship" (Standing, 2013: 6). Queer and feminist scholars show that people who live precarious lives engage in various (aesthetic) labours to transform their conditions, and that this labouring involves the construction of infrastructure that is able to sustain them (Ramsden-Karelse, 2023: 3). Similarly, young people spend their time reading, watching Netflix, scrolling through social media, praying, sleeping, doing research, applying for jobs – these are the labours that keep the future alive. Here, I focus particularly on two different but related activities that are core to this labouring: motivational speak and religious practice.

In Cairo, Pettit (2019) asks how a group of young male graduates who work in precarious, low-paying call centre jobs hang on to a sense of hope in their day-to-day lives. He shows that they are able to do this by forming "cruel" attachments to meritocratic discourses, disseminated by self-help literature, religion, Hollywood and rumour, which promise rewards to those who improvise, work hard and never give up. He adds that (Pettit, 2019:735):

> "This [meritocratic] terrain incites hope, reorienting knowledge in a way that reopens the prospect of future movement (Miyakazi, 2004). It becomes 'cruel', because despite its harmfulness – justifying structural inequalities and placing blame on individuals – people cannot let go of this hope… it is the only way to keep alive the 'scene of their desire'."

In another article, studying a similar group of men, Pettit (2018: 1059) also argues that through "an assemblage of objects, discourses and spaces" (like the UN career fair or an entrepreneurship workshop), Cairo's "global city" keeps these young men attached to the hopeful notion that belonging and success are achievable, which stimulate "cruel" forms of

[15] Although Standing makes the same point, he uses the word "labour" for waged work and the word "work" for the more social reproductive labour.

aspirations and hopes. I argue that similar dynamics are at play among unemployed youth graduates in South Africa.

Nsindiso (25, female), a DUT graduate in Biotechnology, woke up at five AM every morning – sometimes around eight, nine or ten AM. Her day started with completing daily household chores before moving on to job-seeking activities. When she was done, she would read and watch "self-motivating" online content to keep herself "sane". She explained that although being unemployed was difficult, it was very important to her to keep "calm and very patient" to avoid her circumstances "disturbing" her "mentally, emotionally and physically". And she achieved this by reading:

> "You read books that will motivate you or ignite some fire in you to start something else. In that particular manner, you shift your mindset into being employable, into an entrepreneurship mindset."

At the time, she was reading a book titled '*Meet Your Power*' (DJ Zinhle & Mbanga, 2018), which was written by a famous female DJ-turned-entrepreneur in South Africa. Nsindiso explained that the book is about:

> "… self-awareness. You have to be aware of the way you talk to yourself. The way you talk to yourself influences the inner you and your subconscious mind. [The book] talks about positive affirmations and how you have to fight the little person inside of you who keeps telling you that you can't do this."

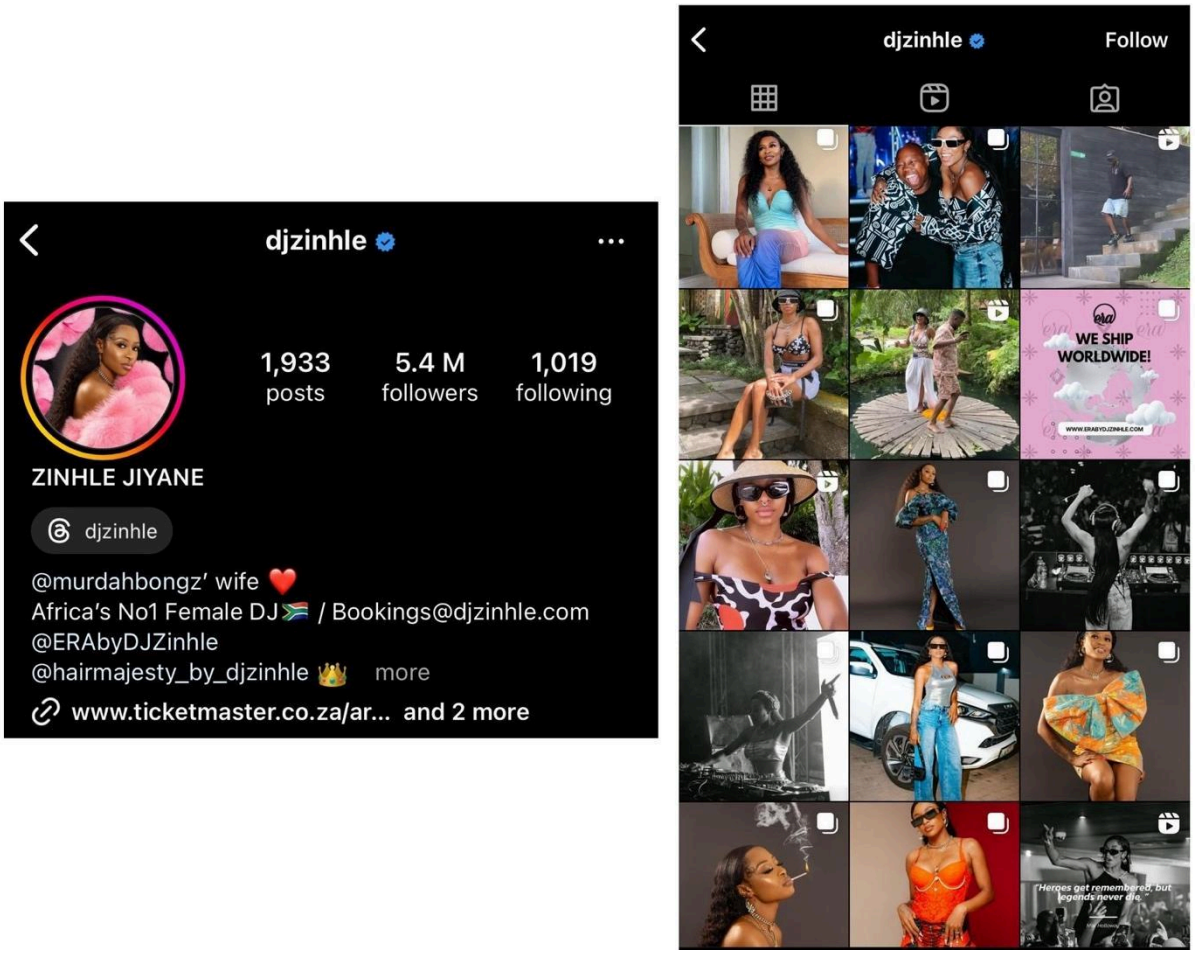


Figure 5: Screenshots from DJ Zinhle's Instagram profile

She spent time watching videos on YouTube as well:

> "I watch Steve Harvey. I watch people who've been through a lot in life and their stories and how they managed to get through certain circumstances, and I will maybe connect the dots to my current life. I watch the very famous people we all see: Jeff Bezos, the guy from Alibaba [Jack Ma]… I will watch as much motivation from them as possible."

These images of people who have made it, especially when they have had to overcome significant obstacles throughout their lives, inspire the hope that they too can overcome their current challenges and achieve a life in which, like DJ Zinhle, they have it all: a husband, a child, a successful career and the luxurious consumption that a good job can afford them – it keeps the future open for possibility. Indeed, Nsindiso expressed this as she explained why watching these videos was so important to her:

> "It makes me know that I'm still young. I shouldn't put pressure on myself. It reminds me that my journey is not the same as, probably, my sister's journey. I have to be very cautious with what I put to myself and tell myself… I have to remind myself that this is [my journey] and I have to focus on it and be as kind to the journey as possible."

Nsindiso also conveys the ways in which these motivational books and videos have allowed her to cope with certain temporalities of unemployment, specifically: the feeling of not being where she should be according to dominant Western, linear, teleological understandings of time and the lifecourse. The feeling of being behind is made through comparisons with peers. These motivational messages were ubiquitous on LinkedIn. The common themes conveyed in these messages were about the importance of persevering, being patient, resilient, and allowing oneself to imagine a situation in which circumstances were radically different – as in, much better. But, importantly, one could never reach that state without persevering. Anele (35, male, UFH Industrial Relations graduate) shared the following post on his LinkedIn page, for example:

> "Hardships often prepare ordinary people for an extraordinary future. Keep going. The best is yet to come."

A lot of the "reposted" motivational messages were also used by "unemployment experts" or job coaches to try to generate business. For example, Anele also shared the following post from someone who describes themselves, in their LinkedIn bio, as a "career coach; ATS resume, cover letter & LinkedIn profile writer":

> "Your prayers will be answered in a few days, and you will receive interview calls from different companies… Don't lose motivation. Have a confidence in you. Believe in yourself. Good days are ahead and you will be blessed with success."

In the same post, at the very end, he adds:

> "DM me, if you need any help in writing: 1. Resume, 2. Cover Letter, 3. LinkedIn Profile Optimization."

In the next section of this chapter, on mobilising work futures, I discuss the role that these unemployment entrepreneurs play in shaping the experiences of job-seeking among these young people. But, as Sheehan (2021) has argued, they create and disseminate a variety of neoliberal discourses that influence how job seekers interpret their unemployment and act

in the face of it. It was the message, but also the hope that a “CV revamp” from a self-styled expert might change their trajectory, that keeps the future open.

It's important to note that these young people don’t just consume motivational content, but they produce it as well – with the aim of motivating themselves as well as others. As I have already mentioned, these young people go through stages of feeling hopeful, depressed and sometimes just okay. And this archiving of self through LinkedIn and other social media sites can provide insight into how and when particular emotions come up and how they manage to get themselves to feel hopeful again. Some of these young people posted daily messages about “soldiering on”, getting back up again and staying positive. Zama (23, female, UJ Finance graduate), for example, contributed to this affective atmosphere of hope online. When I spoke to Zama, she had been looking for a job for about a year. A few weeks later, I found out through LinkedIn that she had gotten a job, which she was of course elated about. She posted a screenshot of the email, which read “Please see your offer of employment as promised”. The screenshot was accompanied by the following caption:

> “And as we come to the end of the business week, the universe continues to use its unlimited resources to help us reach our goals.”

In the weeks that followed, she used her platform and her story to motivate other unemployed graduates. She urged them to believe in themselves, because the opportunities that she had since gained were “beyond anything [she] could have ever imagined”, and other people could have a similar trajectory if they remained open to the possibilities. These motivational messages, for many of the young people that I spoke to, operated alongside religious practice.

God was referenced frequently throughout the interviews, in relation to daily activities, in which participants practised their devotion and found comfort in Christianity, but especially in relation to the future. There were a few participants who, while reflecting on potential reasons for struggling to find work, simply said “maybe it’s not my time”. When I asked them to explain what they meant by that, the explanation was often religious, and was similar to what Noko (27, female, Wits Urban Planning graduate) told me:

> "…being the believer that I am, 'When the time is right, I the Lord will make it'. That's just how it is for me. When the time is right, definitely God will make it happen. He has made it happen with other things in other aspects of my life, why should he fail going forward."

Again, these messages were shared and consumed regularly on LinkedIn – scripture and prayers were posted and reposted between CVs and job advertisements. Felicia (24, female, UL Chemistry graduate), for example, wrote the following message on her page:

> "Wait on the Lord, He will renew your strength."

She also frequently shared images like the following, often captioned "Amen!!!! [sic]":

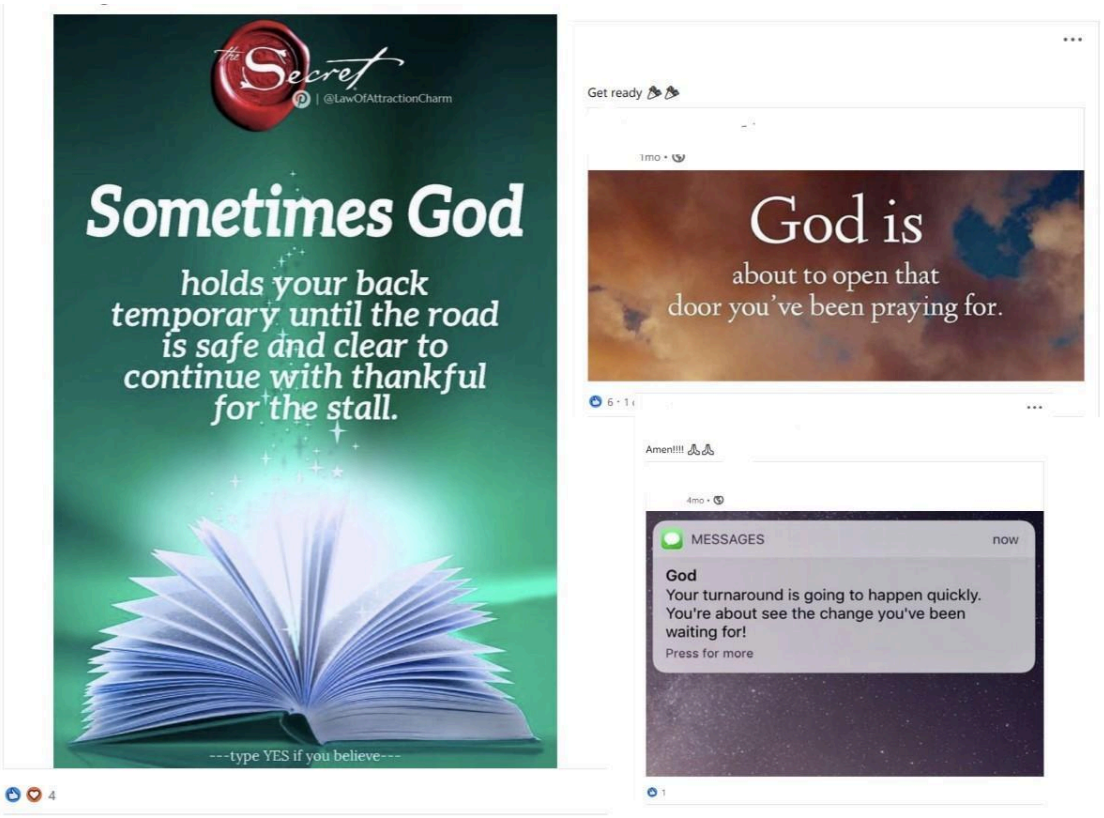


Figure 6: Screenshots from LinkedIn illustrating the kinds of religious posts that were shared by Felicia

A number of scholars have shown how religion (i.e.: Christianity and Islam), for many Africans facing prolonged periods of uncertainty and economic crisis, forms part of a broad repertoire of tools and strategies through which people "make life possible" (Haynes, 2017;

Pettit, 2019; Eisenstein, 2021; Birzle, 2017; Collard, 2021). Eisenstein (2021), for example, offers the idea of pace (a strategic pause) as an analytical frame which she uses to argue that Ugandan women wait wilfully for the right connections to form before moving forward through the life course. And that this time of waiting is waiting for God. In Zambia, Haynes (2017: 2) makes an argument against literatures which focus (disproportionately) on the "relational corrosiveness, individualisation" of Pentecostalism by presenting an account which illustrates the religion's social productivity and "its capacity to create and strengthen interpersonal and institutional ties". In this case, as Sibahle and Felicia have shown, Christian devotion gives them the energy to carry on. Daily challenges are surmountable as long they have God by their side. By reading the Bible, praying and going to church, it gives them the encouragement and the comfort to try again. But religious practice also orients them towards a hopeful future. Religions advance particular notions of temporality. Schulz (2022), for example, highlights that Christian temporalities are linear and that denominations like Pentecostalism, for example, preach radical discontinuity with the past as one becomes more devoted. But to be Christian is also to live a life oriented toward the future – both a life trajectory future and an eschatological future (see Schulz, 2022: 49). Pentecostalism preaches a prosperity gospel of health and wealth through devoted religious practice. Therefore, to be Pentecostal, in particular, is to be radically open to alternatives, novelty and surprise (Haynes, 2021). And everyday labours like fasting, joining a prayer group and sharing scriptures with fellow young people looking for work is an investment in that future.

The aim, here, was not to provide a full, or even thoroughly accurate, account of Christian religious practice among young people in South Africa. Most of the young people that I interviewed said, simply, that they were Christian – Sibahle specified that she was Pentecostal while Nomfundo (introduced in Chapter Four) specified that she was a Seventh Day Adventist. Therefore, what I have described above may not apply to all of their daily experiences and understandings of religious practice, temporalities and unemployment. However, there were a lot of similarities in the ways in which they invoked God. What I aimed to do was to show, like the discussion on motivational messages, how religion features in young people's attempts to keep the future in grasp as it threatens to disappear with each crushing disappointment. In the next section, I continue to explore the daily labours that these young people are engaged in, but with consideration for the kinds of

futures that they are oriented toward. In particular, I discuss young people's attempts to mobilise specific work (career), entrepreneurial and migratory futures.

5.3 Prospecting career, entrepreneurial and mobile futures

5.3.1. Work futures

A significant amount of time and energy was spent trying to actualise professional, white-collar futures in communications, mining, investment banking and engineering. Athi (27, female, CPUT Biotechnology graduate) wanted to work as a microbiologist, and she spent her days looking for these vacancies online:

> "I use the internet. People post a lot of jobs on Facebook. I joined many groups that are posting jobs. Just applying online. I haven't gone to a company to look for a job."

The internet was the primary way that young people looked for jobs. Job seekers and companies were increasingly using online platforms to search for jobs and to recruit. But this became necessary while COVID lockdowns were in place. However, among the young people that I interviewed, they much preferred this because it was a cheaper and more convenient way of looking for work (compared to going out and submitting forms), as according to Graham *et al*. (2019: 371), the cost of job searching can be as high as R1 062 a month. They used LinkedIn to market their capabilities in the hopes of attracting their future employers, and also to connect with people who might help them secure work. This process has itself become a kind of profession, which requires young people to routinely engage in onerous, and sometimes tedious, forms of labour such as customising a CV, networking and developing the kinds of attitudes and forms of conduct that employers say that they are looking for. Conducting the job search online, rather than tarmacking (see Mwaura, 2017), means that they can send tens of applications a day. But this also means that they can receive (and have received) just as many rejection emails back in a day – although, they complained that a lot of the time, they were "ghosted" by employers and recruiters. Each rejection email causes feelings of distress, frustration, sadness and confusion. But it also leads them to broadening their scope.

Athi was looking for jobs in microbiology, but when I spoke to her, she was looking for "anything":

> "I'm also applying for some other positions – receptionist, the admin work. I'm just applying for anything that will come."

Unlike the young men in the studies conducted by Masquelier (2013), Mains (2011) and Jeffrey (2010) who, for various reasons related to social pressures and conceptions about locally salient "fitting" or appropriate work, accepted extended periods of unemployment, the young people that I spoke to commonly said that they were applying for call centre jobs, admin, cleaning, waiting tables and being cashiers. Due to the material, mental and even emotional demands of everyday life, they were desperate to work – anywhere. Remoneilwe (26, female, NWU Business Management graduate) recounted the time that she tried to apply for a job as a cashier in a grocery store:

> "I apply for everything. When I say everything, I mean everything. I don't even go thinking that I have a degree, I have an honour's. A cashier, a cleaner – whatever, I apply. I applied for a cashier role and literally when I got there, the owner was like 'You're overqualified. I don't know what I'm gonna do with you.' At that moment I was like, 'I don't care what you even pay me. I just want a job. Anything is okay.'"

As I discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, their fallback jobs would also be just as difficult to secure because they would be competing for jobs in a segment of the labour market that is highly competitive, and with people who have had years of experience working in those jobs (Bhorat *et al*., 2021). And as I discussed in Chapter Two, they pursued these jobs anyway because they were jobs – wage labour holds a prominent position in the imaginations of people living under neoliberal governance, and it is something that people use to measure their own utility and self-worth in this world. But what Remoneilwe and other young people say also demonstrates the ways in which imagined and desired futures change as people experience challenges in the present and revise their calculations.

As they continued to struggle for work, young people enlisted the help of family and friends, but also the help of a host of self-proclaimed "unemployment experts" and job and career coaches that advertised their services online, especially on LinkedIn. The life coaching industry, which includes career coaches, financial coaches, happiness coaches and

empowerment coaches, is worth billions of U.S. Dollars and growing (Bishop, 2024). Sheehan (2021) argues that there are theoretical reasons to pay attention to these experts, because they shape people's behaviour by defining social problems and offering the solutions. In this case, the reason that Athi was not getting any interviews, according to the expert, was because her CV was not good enough:

> "This year, I decided when I was in Joburg in the first week to look for someone to revamp my CV. They wanted to R150 for revamping the CV. I was like why not. Why not pay for something that will bring something good in life… Even though I didn't have the money. I had to ask my parents."

When I asked whether she thought that it was a valuable purchase, she said:

> "I just feel like maybe it will now attract the recruiters and they will consider calling me for the interview. Now that I revamped the CV, I'm hoping for the best – that maybe I will get something. Maybe the problem was the CV. I really don't know."

For Athi, this was an investment in her future as a working microbiologist, and doing so led her to feeling cautiously hopeful. It is clear that young people need support while they are looking for work. In particular, they need help with CVs, ensuring that they are able to accurately communicate the skills that they have and, generally, gaining more knowledge about employment and recruitment processes. However, to be clear, structural issues remain the dominant barriers to securing work. But without this support, young people may continue to fall prey to employment entrepreneurs online who are able to capitalise on people's lack of knowledge and desperation. This highlights that there is a gap in support for young people who have graduated and no longer have access to university career services and other information that could be useful in helping them to navigate their current circumstances. However, this is not a substitute for providing comprehensive, universal support for young people in the form of, for example, cash grants and decent work opportunities.

Sheehan (2021: 490) finds that many unemployment experts themselves "emerge from the ranks of the precariously employed and work to help others navigate their own precarity". I came across this in my fieldwork, when Nomfundo (who I introduced in the previous chapter) told me that she had been in contact with another research participant about

potentially paying him to edit her CV. This came up when I asked what strategies she was using to look for work:

> "It's only now that I thought of those guys with the CV revamps. Maybe if I do that, I can be invited for an interview. I have to find a way to get R150 so that I can do it… Those guys say they are the masters of the ATS [application tracking system]. If they do that for me, then I stand high chances of maybe getting an interview."

She then said that she had been speaking to Sipho (the research participant, and someone whose entrepreneurial pursuits I discuss in the next section) and another man online:

> "… they're always posting the reviews of other guys thanking them and telling them that they landed a job, they landed an interview."

Sipho wasn't the only unemployed graduate that I spoke to who was earning money from giving other young people advice about getting employment. It was an opportunity that was created partly through growing a large following on LinkedIn. They, therefore, used their platforms to make some money while they looked for jobs in their careers. At the time of writing this, I don't know whether Sipho had managed to find the kind of job that he was looking for. But judging from his LinkedIn profile, the career coaching is going well. He may well have decided to follow that path.

Even though, as I have shown here, young people spent considerable amounts of time and energy mobilising these professional futures, the next section shows that they were ultimately sceptical about the futures that careers in corporate companies could deliver in the long term, and whether those were futures that were desirable.

5.3.2. Entrepreneurial futures

During his address in the 2022 State of the Nation Address (SONA), President Cyril Ramaphosa acknowledged that youth unemployment was a crisis, and then outlined the initiatives that his government has put in place to combat this crisis (South African Government, 2022). In addition to the promise to create jobs through various schemes, he called on young people to take responsibility for their futures by starting their own businesses (South African Government, 2022):

"We all know that government does not create jobs. Business creates jobs."

Governments across Africa have increasingly come to promote entrepreneurship as the solution to widespread youth unemployment and poverty reduction (Mwaura, 2017; Di Nunzio, 2012; Pettit, 2018; Gough & Langevang, 2016; Dawson, 2021). In the same SONA, Ramaphosa proudly announced that the Department of Small Business Development and the National Youth Development Agency (NYDA) had reached their target of supporting a thousand youth-owned enterprises in one hundred days – particularly in township and rural economies (South African Government, 2022). And that the target had been expanded to reach fifteen thousand youth-owned enterprises through a Fund supported by the department for small businesses, the NYDA and the European Union (South African Government, 2022). As Wout (2018) has argued, international NGOs and Western donor organisations have descended upon cities in the global South to fund and set up entrepreneurial training programmes to support young people, and especially women, who are looking to escape joblessness and poverty. But discourses that celebrate entrepreneurship as an empowering livelihood strategy don't just come from above. Although the logics are slightly different, the rise of "hustle culture" and "rise-and-grind" (Carnegie, 2023) discourses which are promoted by celebrities and social media influencers contribute to creating narratives that encourage people to embrace entrepreneurialism. In this study, entrepreneurship came up in two ways. First, young people, like Sibahle, whose story I presented in the introduction to this chapter, spoke about entrepreneurship as something to do right now in order to fill their time, distract themselves and earn some money so that they can support themselves or at least do the things that they want to do without having to ask their parents or friends for money. This could be described as what other authors have called "necessity entrepreneurship" (Acs, 2006: 100) or "subsistence-oriented entrepreneurship" (Wout, 2018: 23). Secondly, young people discussed their entrepreneurial ambitions with a longer trajectory in mind, where they imagined owning wealth-producing businesses that they could pass down to their children. I argue that this particular imagination of the future conveys something important about how they understood and valued waged work.

Young people were constantly thinking about potential businesses that they could start while they looked for work. But getting any of these ideas off the ground was challenging. As Tedmanson *et al*. (2012: 532) argue, "entrepreneurship has been increasingly eulogised in dominant neo-liberal policy discourses" as a cornerstone of economic growth and a creator of employment opportunities. However, this unquestioning idealisation of the entrepreneur obscures the contradictions, ambiguities, tensions and challenges that people have to navigate in their attempts to become an entrepreneur (Tedmanson *et al*., 2012). Sipho, as evidenced by his online career advice business, was one of the few entrepreneurial young people that I spoke to. He was a Chemical Engineering graduate, and after struggling to find work after graduation, he moved from his hometown in the Eastern Cape province to Pretoria in the Gauteng province. When he arrived, he said to himself:

> "I have to start my own thing if I am not getting a job."

He wanted to start a business that was related to what he had studied so that, as he explained, would "not be lost when doing research". He decided that he was going to start manufacturing dishwashing soap and other cleaning chemicals. He registered his company with the Companies and Intellectual Property Commission and then went to his nearest Nedbank branch to open a business account:

> "There at Nedbank, they said I have to put R60 in that bank account every month."

However, after three months of not being able to deposit any money into the account, the bank closed it. What Sipho did next was try to take advantage of the opportunities that the President had outlined in his SONA speech. He developed a business plan and wrote to the NYDA about opportunities for start-up funding. But he was told that in order to be eligible to apply for this funding, he needed a management certificate. And that he could enrol in their management programme if he didn't have this certificate. This was not going to work for Sipho:

> "For me, that was not satisfying me to attend their programmes because I am not making money. I am not depending on anyone. If I'm gonna go attend classes, which means I'm gonna starve in my place. I need to make money."

Capital for start-up businesses is very hard to come by (Bröckling *et al*., 2016; Steuer *et al*., 2017). The BusinessTech (2021) reports that South Africa has one of the highest failure rates for small and medium business in the world, with five out of seven of these businesses failing within their first year. They went on to say that access to finance was the primary challenge that these businesses faced, and that only 6% of them reported receiving support from the government. As one participant succinctly remarked, "Without money, nothing is moving at all". What's more, I would argue, is that the legacies of apartheid's racially determined zoning legislation, which restricted Black people from trading in the cities, has contributed to the phenomenon, in South Africa, where a relatively small informal sector exists alongside high levels of unemployment (a trend that is at odds with comparable countries) (BusinessTech, 2021). This plays a role in limiting the opportunity spaces that young people have for establishing enterprises.

One thing that stood out to me, as I conducted the interviews, was that young women appeared to have unique opportunities for starting businesses. As I discussed earlier, Sibahle was interested in selling a hair product, but was struggling to source a brand that was "not fake", she said. Athi (27, female, CPUT Biotechnology graduate) had started a hair business while she was living with her parents in the Eastern Cape:

> "I do people's hair. I plait hair. Last year, what I did was I just wrote on my Facebook that I'm doing people's hair around Eastern Cape, Umthatha if someone wants to do their hair. Then I became busy around November, December, as you know because it's festive season and everyone wants to do their hair. I was quite busy."

But when she moved to Joburg in an attempt to boost her job-seeking efforts while living with her sister-in-law, she stopped braiding hair:

> "I don't know whether you know Alexandra, but it's too overcrowded. There are many people and there are many salons. You find out that in the same street, you have like five, six salons. So everyone is doing it here. I don't think I'll do it here."

As Porter *et al*. (2018) observed, from studying young people in Malawi who made money from charging phone batteries in an area where few people had reliable access to electricity,

young people's businesses faced diminishing returns as more people start to offer the same service or product.

Mable was another young woman who was running a fashion and/or beauty-related business. She graduated with a BA in Communications and Languages from the University of Johannesburg. After struggling to find work for a while, she started to sell oils, scrubs and other facial products. And then she added lingerie and false eyelashes to the list of products that she was offering. She explained that that's where she gets "money to do [her] things". When I first spoke to Mable, she was living with her family in the northern Limpopo province of South Africa. But when we spoke again, she had moved back to Joburg, because she felt that looking for work and trying to run a business from home were both challenging:

> "We don't have a lot of courier companies since it's the villages. That is a disadvantage for my hustle. In the city, I will be able to use courier companies for sending out products and all that."

She had managed to connect with a woman who was renting out floor space in the living room of a one-bedroom apartment in downtown Johannesburg, and that's where she lived for a while. She liked the location because she was close to a place called "Small Street", which is a shopping and retail centre that became popular for selling counterfeit versions of well-known fashion brands as well as selling trendy items of clothing for cheap prices. But Small Street is also notorious for high levels of petty crime. There are often posts that circulate on social media, giving people tips on how to prevent their phones and other valuable items from being stolen while they're in the area. Mable has used this opportunity to shop for goods on Small Street, and then sell them online to people who either don't want to go to Small Street themselves or people who live too far away but want access to the latest fashion items (like her friends and acquaintances in Limpopo). Mable goes to Small Street once a week and takes pictures of the clothes and accessories that are available. She then posts these pictures on her Facebook and Instagram pages as well as on her WhatsApp status, where she receives orders from potential customers. She then goes back to Small Street to purchase the orders and sends them using a parcel service from the low-cost retail store PEP.

Mable's hustle, as she calls it, resonates, with what Amankwaa *et al*. (2020) have observed in their study about mobile phone usage among young people in Accra, where platform-mediated entrepreneurship has taken off. In reference to a 28-year-old Ghanaian woman who used her phone to vlog and offer fashion and cosmetic consulting services as a way to make money, the authors note that (Amankwaa *et al*., 2020: 370):

> "Exposure to fashion trends is shaping and being shaped by the global fashion and entertainment industry. Whereas previously young people had to choose their designs or styles from a fashion calendar or magazine present in the shop, now they use images from their phone from various parts of Ghana and abroad to propose their preferred clothing and make-up styles for dressmakers and beauticians. This trend poses new challenges as businesses have to be more responsive to variable demands. Yet it also provides opportunities for demonstrating young people's individual ingenuities, which can become a springboard for future business prospects."

There were more women who, like Mable and Athi, were selling handbags, sunglasses, fragrances and starting "beauty and lifestyle" vlogging channels on YouTube. However, as many participants said, what they were doing or thinking about doing was "just for now" – a respectable and socially-sanctioned staging post along a longer trajectory. But there was another way that young people spoke about entrepreneurship.

Marinkie (29, female) was another Chemical Engineering student who graduated from Tshwane University of Technology. Towards the end of our conversation, I asked her where she saw herself in five to ten years, and she listed a few potential futures. She wanted to own a recycling plant. She also wanted to own a hedge fund with a romantic life partner. She spoke about owning a clothing boutique. And then she also mentioned that she might do something in farming. She wasn't necessarily thinking of pursuing any one future over the others – some of them could co-exist within a single future imaginary. I noted that all of her plans were entrepreneurial, and she responded:

> "I don't think that even if I find a job, I will work until I retire. I don't want that. I never wanted that. The finding employment thing is for funding."

This was a common sentiment among these young people who imagined futures in which they were business owners. Waged work was seen as a method of gaining capital for future entrepreneurial pursuits. Earlier scholarship on work/jobs has argued that despite the

"proper job" being a historical and geographical exception in the global South, people still retain moral, psychological and social attachments to waged work, especially as a vehicle for class mobility (Barchiesi, 2011; Monteith *et al*., 2021; Dawson, 2021; Fouksman, 2021). A study by Graham *et al*. (2019: 17) on youth transitions over ten years found that in 1995, there were almost no participants who mentioned entrepreneurship as a career option. And in 2015, there was more appetite for entrepreneurship. This increase was probably attributable to an increased emphasis on entrepreneurship education and new government policies promoting youth entrepreneurship in response to rising unemployment. However, the authors note, this was still not a preferred career path for most of them because they associated professional waged work with security and stability of income (Graham *et al*., 2019). However, the young people that I interviewed appeared to be questioning the ability of waged work to mobilise the stable, middle-class futures that they were after. Marinkie explained why she preferred to focus on being an entrepreneur in the future:

> "Remember you get a permanent contract, it's only permanent as long as they say so. There's no guarantee that it's permanent. But if it's your business, you can see the real ups and downs of it… The reason I'm looking for being a businesswoman is that I want to do something for myself so that I don't get disappointed by those companies out there. I also want to be able to say I started this. And this is where it is today. And also, when I eventually have kids, I want them to have something that they can inherit from me and grow further. And, also, I want to be part of the solution to this problem of unemployment. If I manage to employ at least one person from these pool of people who are saying they are unemployed, then I'll have done something."

Anxieties about waged work being insecure or "disappointing", as Marinkie said, were formed largely out of their own experiences and, sometimes, through observing the experiences of others. As I explained in Chapter One, National Diploma graduates are required to complete a work experience module in the final year of their studies in order to graduate. The National Diploma graduates that I interviewed were either let go at the end of their six to twelve-month internships, where, as Sibahle stated, their contracts ended "just like that" or were precariously employed until the employer was able to replace them with another set of work experience students whose salaries are subsidised by the government. Athi completed her work experience in a lab as a microbiologist assistant during her internship period, but was not hired permanently because, before the end of her contract, employees were retrenched and then the lab was outsourced. Similarly, Nsindiso (25,

female, DUT Biotechnology graduate) had an internship experience that she said convinced her of the importance of "having your own thing":

> "Because, let me make an example with my previous job. It was terminated before the actual contract ended… Any company can drop you at any time and replace you, it's not guaranteed. Even if they're not dropping you, we are being underpaid at some point. So you can't meet all your expenses like you want."

According to Ashman *et al*. (2011), the growth of the finance industry (financialisation) has underpinned and perpetuated neoliberalism all over the world. Financialisation refers, loosely, to the expansion of financial markets, institutions and actors that have emerged since the late 70s. This includes, for example, "the expanding range of financial activities in the economy; the proliferation of financial services and instruments… including the now-[in]famous sub-prime mortgages" (Prouse, 2022: 520). Speculation, which Bear (2020: 1) has defined as the affective, physical and intellectual labour that aims to accumulate capital, has been a significant part of the financialisation of states. Prouse (2022: 518) argues that although speculative regimes of capital are not new (he traces them back to colonial speculation that financed various imperial activities), "the sheer amount of speculation… and the speed with which it moves and re-makes environments is unprecedented". In South Africa, one of the consequences of financialisation and high finance speculation has been the loss of millions of jobs and the emergence of jobless growth (Ashman *et al*., 2011). Young people have to operate within these speculative regimes of capital, where they are forced to grapple with its consequences in their everyday lives and in their futuring. While speculation is often theorised as future-oriented, these young people's experiences show how subjectivities formed under speculative regimes are also informed by the past (Prouse, 2022; Bear, 2020). It is through working in insecure and exploitative jobs that young people come to imagine and desire futures in which they are their own bosses.

I'd like to return to Marinkie's explanation for her interest in entrepreneurship to make two additional points. First, there was a lot of emphasis, among this group, on building businesses that can create generational wealth and businesses that their children (future or present) could one day inherit. In the context of stark inequalities and a history of racial dispossession under colonialism and apartheid, narratives of entrepreneurship that are linked to independence, ownership and generational social mobility draw wide appeal. And,

secondly, these young people emphasised that in pursuing entrepreneurship, they wanted to be part of the solution (and not the problem) by creating employment for others through their businesses. This sentiment harks back to neoliberal discourses that call on young people to get up and do it for themselves, and illustrates an internalisation of that logic. Although, as I have argued, this embrace is never complete, and continually exists alongside discourses that acknowledge the structural barriers that they face.

5.3.3. Escape and return: imaginations of elsewhere

While struggling to find a job, young people started imagining and mapping alternative futures. And for many, like Sibahle, whose contemplations I presented at the start of this chapter, this involved moving abroad. Mable had also started to think about that possibility:

> "I was even saying it this morning, that I'm thinking of the teaching English abroad programmes. I thought since I'm not finding a job in corporate as I wanted, I think I should look into teaching English abroad. Just something different from what I wanted. I can't say a lot about that because it's just an idea."

While Sibahle and Mable were thinking about it, Sne (unknown age, female, UFH LLB graduate) had started to take the steps required for a move to China, but her plans were thwarted by the pandemic:

> "One thing I didn't tell you is that— *pauses and laughs out loud* I made a job application to go and teach in China. I did my TOEFL certificate… I got an interview with a school based in Wuhan. They gave me a job offer and I just needed to go to the doctor and get examined. But COVID happened. I was going to leave without me getting admitted [to the legal courts as an attorney] because I was so frustrated when I was unemployed. And I didn't want to stay at home and not do anything. I wanted to keep myself busy."

Digital and social media plays a significant role in cultivating aspirations to become an English teacher in East Asia among young unemployed graduates in South Africa. Research conducted in other contexts similarly illustrates the importance of digital and social media in international migration decision-making. Olawale & Ridwan (2021) argue that, in Nigeria, social media influences young people's decisions on when, how and where to migrate. The "then and now" social media trend, in which Nigerians living abroad posted pictures of themselves then (living in Nigeria) and now (living in North America or Western Europe) in

order to demonstrate the achievement of social mobility, encourages young people seeking to better their lives to imagine and mobilise that kind of future for themselves (Olawale & Ridwan, 2021). Adegoke (2023) argues that the internet has contributed to the recent spike in emigration among upwardly mobile young Nigerians – a phenomenon that has colloquially been named "*Japa*", which means to "run away" or to flee from an unpleasant situation (Babalola, 2021). He shows how social media facilitates the process from intention to action by providing information and access to migrant networks in destination countries (Adegoke, 2023). In the context of rural Indonesia, Hidayat *et al*. (2023) argue for the importance of studying the role that the internet plays in increased migration among youth from rural areas. They argue that their departure has significant consequences for farming and food production, and that understanding the future mobility of young people by recognising the role that social media and other internet tools play is essential for managing the sustainability of farming industries in the rural areas (Hidayat *et al*., 2023). My own context was similar. Mable, for example, often watched vlogs by a popular South African YouTuber who had moved to South Korea to teach English. The vlogger, whose name is Merica, regularly uploaded videos showcasing what life was like as a young, Black woman living and working in South Korea. She also posted videos in which she responded to her audience's frequently asked questions and shared tips for how graduates in South Africa could successfully make the move abroad. It was through watching these videos that teaching English abroad became one of the potential futures that Mable would imagine and start to work towards, and this was partly because the process became demystified:

> "Before listening to the vlog, teaching English abroad always seemed like it was this hard thing and you need to do a lot of things before you even get there. But then she explained the process because now she's there teaching English in South Korea. She was explaining all that and I thought okay, it's not as hard as I thought. After she explained, I found it easier. And I matched the requirements and the options available. She was saying something about there being a programme where you can go for six months and if you don't like it, you can come back. But for me, it's [about] experiencing a different culture and all that, so I was like 'Okay, no. I think I should do that.'"

Many young people across Africa aspire to migrate in order to overcome experiences of waithood or a sense of being stuck in their lives (Pettit and Ruijtenberg, 2019; Collard, 2021). The majority of the studies that investigate the imagined or desired international future

mobilities of young Africans present stories in which these young people articulate desires to move to the West. Daniel Mains (2011) frames the discussions about international migration among the young Ethiopian men as spatial solutions to the temporal problems that they faced (i.e.: having too much time and not being able to follow linear progressions through time to reach social adulthood). Each year, they applied to the U.S. Diversity Immigrant Visa lottery in order to mobilise this imagined future. But on a day-to-day basis, they met to chew Khat and talk about how their lives overseas would unfold. Because of local normative values concerning occupational status and shame, migration was also a way to achieve the social and spatial distance required to take up work that would otherwise be stigmatised in their hometowns (Mains, 2011; Masquelier, 2013). Bunnell *et al*. (2018), on the other hand, study the aspirations that underpin the growing numbers of young Africans pursuing higher education in China. These students imagine a life in China where they can gain a qualification as well as a range of cultural and language skills in an attempt to improve their life chances and contribute to the achievement of collective family projects back home (Bunnell *et al*., 2018). The authors also argue that while many African countries have a long history of migration, earlier groups of migrants moved to North America or Western Europe. But, today, "aspirational geographies have changed, or at least diversified, with dreams as likely to lead African migrants eastward, especially to cities in China, which are seen as the new locus of modernisation and development" (Bunnell *et al*., 2018: 42). I argue that in South Africa, not only do aspirational geographies appear to be changing, but so too are the demographic characteristics of the people who are migrating.

During South Africa's transition to democracy, hundreds of thousands of white South Africans fled the country due, allegedly, to fears of increasing crime (BBC, 2014). In the three decades since, white South Africans have continued to leave the country. In 1996, white residents in South Africa accounted for 11% of the population. And in 2021, they accounted for 8% (Moyo, 2021). The top three destination countries among these emigrating groups are the United Kingdom, Australia and the United States (Moyo, 2021). The privileges accrued by their whiteness (and (upper) middle class status), which include British ancestral ties and their socio-cultural background stemming from the colonial histories of South Africa and the U.K., means that they enjoy greater opportunities for international mobility and permanent emigration – especially in majority white countries (Halvorsrud, 2017: 96 - 97).

However, opportunities arising for unemployed graduates in East Asian countries have the potential to change (or at least diversify) the existing state of affairs. Because of the "value" of the English language in the current global economy, the English language teaching market has grown exponentially worldwide, but especially in Asia (Jeon, 2020: 1). In recognition of the value of English speakers in the economy, various Asian governments have attempted to strengthen their public education programmes for teaching and learning English (Jeon, 2020). Part of this effort has included initiatives to increase the number of native English-speaking teachers in the education system (Jeon, 2020). While different countries or programmes have different requirements for the eligibility of English teachers, most require that applicants have either just a university degree that was taught in English or a TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language) certificate in addition to a degree. This potentially opens up new opportunities for unemployed graduates – the majority of whom are Black, and many from low-income backgrounds. While the data on the numbers of young, and particularly Black, South Africans moving to Asia to teach English is not available, the anecdotal evidence (from newspaper articles, social media and my own informal observations) shows that more and more young people are making the move. This analysis is, of course, speculative. Bunnell *et al.* (2018) note that the African interviewees found life in Chinese cities challenging because of the racism that they encountered in their everyday lives. As more and more young people go and start to share some of these challenges, those that are watching from South Africa while still thinking about it or making plans to go might become dissuaded. Moreover, as Pettit and Ruijtenberg (2019) and Collard (2021: 822) discuss, cruel migratory regimes inhibit millions of people from realising their migratory aspirations. Therefore, these opportunities in Asia are always at risk of closing down for Africans. However, the option of traveling abroad wasn't actually possible for some of these young people. Even though Sibahle spoke a lot about moving abroad, she explains that she hasn't applied for any teaching programmes or done anything else towards realising this goal because she doesn't have a passport and can't afford to get one. It costs R600 to apply for and receive a new passport in South Africa. This is an amount that is certainly not accessible for young people and families like Sibahle.

While the majority of the young people that I interviewed were looking to move East, there were a small number of participants who were thinking about potential futures in the West.

Semakaleng (27, female, UP Engineering graduate), for instance, wanted to move to Canada. She argued that moving to Canada will provide her with more opportunities to earn the capital that she needed to start her future business in South Africa by getting jobs in her field. Through conversations with a friend that she met at university (whose sister was living in Canada), she imagined a prosperous life in Canada which she contrasted against a stressful life in failing (or failed) South Africa:

> "I say this because, firstly, [there are] job opportunities for what I have studied. And also, I think how they run the country is appealing to me. Fine, they pay high taxes and what not, but you know where your tax money is going. In South Africa, it's a different ball game. You don't get the highest salary, you get taxed on top of that but you don't see where the tax is going in terms of services. In South Africa, service delivery is pathetic. Those are the kinds of things that push one away. When I look at Canada, I think it's a good place. Especially given that Canada is – especially compared to other countries – it's a high migration country, if I can put it like that. I think there's more diaspora there versus other countries. It's more diversified and that's why I'm contemplating it amongst other countries."

Similar to Sibahle's comment about her plans to move abroad and only return to South Africa if it hasn't "turned into Zimbabwe", Semakaleng's continuous contrasting of South Africa with Canada shows how individual futuring is caught up with broader imaginaries about national pasts, presents and futures. However, the overwhelming sentiment among those prospecting a future abroad was the desire to return to South Africa with new skills as well as resources that will allow them to achieve their goals, like building a home, a business or starting a family.

5.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the ways in which young people experience and navigate unemployment in their everyday lives over two main sections. First, I have asked how it is that, despite repeated and devastating disappointment, these young people were able to keep going. Understanding these activities as forms of labour, I suggest that it is through their engagement with online aspirational content as well as undertaking various religious practices that they are able to keep the future (or futures) in grasp. In the second part of this chapter, I discussed the kinds of futures that these young people were orienting themselves towards. I organised this discussion into three themes: work, entrepreneurship and

migration - as these were the themes that emerged as salient during data collection and analysis. A significant portion of their everyday lives was dedicated to mobilising particular work futures in engineering, investment banking, science research - depending on their academic background. However, unlike unemployed young men in other contexts who deliberately waited for jobs suitable to their level of education to emerge, the young people that I spoke to were looking for any job - even though those jobs were proving equally as difficult to secure. With regards to entrepreneurship, I showed how it features in processes of futuring in two ways: as a stop-gap activity, something that they do while they wait for a job, but also as a longer-term strategy for creating wealth. Despite governments encouraging young people to create their own jobs, I showed how difficult it was for them to become entrepreneurs, especially because of the lack of financial capital. But I also showed how young women may be uniquely positioned to take advantage of trends in fashion and beauty to make money while they look for work. However, young people also framed waged employment as something that was temporary along a future trajectory that culminated in a successful business that could be passed down to their children. Finally, I explored young people's imaginations of elsewhere, through which I observed a complex and ambivalent mix of hopeful longing and apprehension. But also tensions between desires to leave and structural constraints that prevented them from doing so.

By discussing these experiences and everyday strategies for navigating unemployment, this chapter has made several contributions to the literature on the geographies of youth and geographies of future-making. First, by focusing on everyday activities like watching YouTube videos, scrolling though Twitter, praying and going to church on Sundays, I have broadened discussions about how young people get by beyond economic activities. Secondly, this chapter responds to calls by geographers and other social scientists to examine the ways in which ordinary people make futures. In doing so, I have also highlighted the complex ways in which young people imagine waged work as part of their futures, and the potentially shifting geographies of aspiration that are born out of growing opportunities for teaching English in East Asian countries.

6 Relationships to time and relationships in time: loafing, kinship and friendships in everyday unemployment

6.1. Introduction

Noxolo grew up in Mpumalanga with her three brothers, who were all raised by their mother. She went to the University of Johannesburg, where she graduated with a Bachelor of Social Science in Public Management and Policy because she "fell in love with politics", she explained. A few months after graduation, she managed to secure an internship. For two years, she worked at MTN, a multi-national telecommunications company that has partnered with government under the YES (Youth Employment Service) programme – an initiative that aims to provide "opportunities for young people to be exposed to the world of work through internships, through mentorships and through entrepreneurship programmes" in order to improve their chances of gaining permanent employment at the end of their participation programme (Buthelezi, 2022)[16]. It was through her relationships and networks that Noxolo came to know about this opportunity:

> "I have a cousin who works at Vodacom head office. She had a friend who was working at MTN. I told my cousin to let me know if she hears of any opportunities because I'm done with my degree now and I'm looking for an internship. And she said she'd let me know if she heard anything. Her friend overheard the HR people— because she was working in the same building as them. She overheard them talking about that they need to get graduates, the ones that have degrees… Then she called my cousin and said, 'If your cousin is still looking for a job and internships—' Then I told her to forward my CV. So that's how I got the job."

Noxolo's experience is consistent with the literature which shows that friends and family networks are the primary routes through which (young) people get jobs, therefore sustaining and exacerbating social and economic inequalities (Bourdieu, 2011; Gershon, 2017; Branson *et al*., 2019). When Noxolo's contract expired in 2020, it was not renewed because, she explained, "they told us about COVID-19, budgets and stuff". Despite possessing a degree and two years of work experience, she has since struggled to find work and has had limited social capital from which to draw on in order to secure a permanent job.

[16] According to YES non-executive director, Cas Coovadia, as of July 2022, YES had created 82 207 temporary work opportunities and "only around 30% to 35% of those opportunities were converted to full-time or permanent employment" (Buthelezi, 2022). An evaluation of YES conducted by the World Bank (2022) reported that youth who participated in YES had only a 6% higher likelihood of being employed post-participation.

When I met her, she spent her days “applying, applying, applying, applying”. But on the days when she felt demotivated and hopeless, she went for a run or slept all day in order to pass the abundant and seemingly unending amount of time that her everyday life was characterised by as an unemployed young person. She revealed that she had also been considering completing an Honour’s degree to occupy her time while she waited.

In this chapter, I bring together literatures on everyday temporalities (time-wasting, in particular) and relationality to argue that temporalities of loafing (re)shape the terms on which young people are able to make kin, engage with family and build forms of sociality. In the first section of this chapter, I place Noxolo’s activities of sleeping all day and going for a run in the context of ideas about wasting time and being, as one young person described it, “*umahlalela*”. Couched within a wider literature on young men’s cultures of time-wasting in different contexts, I present a spatio-temporally specific account of loafing or time-wasting among educated unemployed youth in South Africa. In the second section of this chapter, I argue that loafing poses a challenge to heteronormative conceptualisations of the life course and social reproduction, and that relationships both shape and are shaped by loafing in everyday unemployment. In particular, I examine how young people engage with and relate to their family and their friends as unemployed graduates. In the rest of this introduction, I continue to tell Noxolo’s story, whose experiences with family and friends begin to introduce many of the themes that are discussed in this chapter.

Noxolo had a complex relationship with her family, which simultaneously shaped her experience of unemployment and was shaped by unemployment. Sadly, Noxolo’s mother passed away during the first year of her university studies. Because of this, she preferred to either stay on her own when she could afford to do so or live with friends in Joburg while she continued to search for a job. However, when the country went into lockdown, she was forced to go back home. This was the first time since their mother had passed away that Noxolo and all of her siblings were living under the same roof. She said that it produced a lot of tension, especially between her and the oldest sibling. She felt that he wasn’t doing enough to contribute to (financially) supporting the youngest siblings, but also acknowledged that he seemed to be the sibling struggling the most with the passing of their mother. This meant that although they were both unemployed, she felt that the

responsibility for supporting the youngest fell on her as the second oldest sibling, and this made unemployment stressful and the search especially urgent:

> "I need to take care of my siblings. That's how it happened after my mom passed away. I just lost focus about doing things for myself, but it's to help my brothers and to make sure that the have a good future."

She wondered whether, in the future, taking care of her brothers will be reciprocated, but it was a complicated reflection:

> "It's mixed emotions. You have that thing that you're sacrificing for other people and hoping that also you're gonna get the favour returned one day, even though it might not be in the way that you're giving to them. You never know what the future holds because they didn't ask me to do that for them. I volunteered and I decided that I'll do it because they are my siblings. I must also not put pressure on them and say that 'because I was there for you, you now need to be there for me'. It should be their choice that 'okay, it's fine, we're gonna be there for you because you were there for us as a sister'. But if they decided not to be there, it's nothing that I can control… but anyway, I'm doing it and I've got faith that one day it's also gonna be beneficial on my side."

By the time I met Noxolo, she had moved out of her family house in Mpumalanga and was living with her girlfriend and her girlfriend's family in Roodepoort – a former mining camp just west of the centre of Joburg. She was still looking for work, and stressed how valuable the support that she had received from her girlfriend and her friends had been:

> "My friends sometimes give me money because they know my situation. And my girlfriend is also helping me… Some of them I send my CVs. Some of my friends are HR specialists and they do assist and tell me 'No, we've got posts'. Some of them they do support me emotionally. They say, 'When you want to talk to us, it's fine. We're there.' Some of them they buy me data. Even though I don't ask for data, they say 'No, we know you need data to keep on searching for jobs.' They call me. They check up on me. Also, my girlfriend plays a big part by supporting mentally and emotionally, saying 'Things will be fine. Don't worry. Hang in there. Whatever you need, I'll support you.'"

While Noxolo faced the responsibility of having to take care of her family, her romantic partner and friends played a key role in providing the material and emotional support that she needed. As Bunnell *et al*. (2011) have argued, changes can occur in everyday life which have the potential to blur family and friendship roles and possibly deepening the role of friendship in meeting various material, emotional and social needs. While Noxolo's story is

unique (in that her family dynamics and responsibilities are at least partly based on the passing of her mother), I illustrate in later parts of this chapter that other young people face similar responsibilities (or pressures) to provide care or support rather than receive it. And that different kinds of family, friend and other relationships overlapped to shape young people's sociality and how they experienced everyday unemployment more generally. However, friendships weren't always free of tension. Noxolo made friends while she was at UJ, and spoke briefly about how, because some of her friends were from more well-off families, they paid for her nights out when she couldn't afford to go out with them. When I asked whether she knew what they were doing after university, she said that most of them had made the kind of progress that she had imagined for herself:

> "The ones who I did with them the same course: some of them are working in government, they're permanent. Most of them, they bought cars last year, some [bought] houses. Some are starting families, they're getting *lobola'd* [married]. Life is just good."

She believes that their backgrounds played a crucial role in getting them to where they were at that point:

> "Because of connections, obviously. All of them, their brothers are working. Most of my close circle, they're from very good families where there's a mother and a father and the family has a company— or some of [their parents] are doctors, some of them they are lawyers. So some of them managed to buy them flats. The one that I'm close to, she's staying in Fourways now. They bought her a flat and they bought her a car now and she's working. Her brother managed to put her in Investec."

Even though she was close friends with someone who was better connected than her, Noxolo didn't feel comfortable about directly asking her friends to use those connections in ways that could benefit her as well:

> "I feel like with that one, I'm sceptical to ask because I like to believe that when a person tells you about their situation, it shows that they're asking for help indirectly even though they're not saying 'please help me'. If a person is sharing their situation and they don't act on it or they don't see the need of doing anything for you, then clearly, even if you ask them, they won't really help you."

University is a place where friendships can occur between people who occupy different positions along local and broader hierarchies, especially in terms of class (Dyson, 2010;

Nakassis, 2014). However, as Noxolo's story illustrates, leaving university can highlight those differences in ways that have the potential to cause tensions and dissolve friendships, as was sometimes the case here:

> "Some of them I do keep in touch with them. Some of them they do invite me but I can't go on those celebrations and events because I don't have the means for me to go there. Transport, now I need to get an outfit. You need to have money. You can't just go. Some they invite me, but most of the time I reject their invite. I tell them that I'm in Mpumalanga. I make up a story – not saying I'm not gonna go because of money, just say I'm not available or at home there's something happening even when there's nothing. Just to avoid meeting people when you're not in a good space… When you go out with people and you're socialising with them, then when people come with their cars, you feel like they're bragging to you because you don't have a car. Everything, *nje,* you take it personally. So, I'm just avoiding that – just stay at home."

What Noxolo says in this quote and in the previous quote about asking for help conveys some ideas about how she understands friendship and what goes into maintaining friendships. It also suggests that because of being unemployed, her social world has in some ways become smaller, whether that has been because she has avoided friends due to feelings of shame or because she cannot physically travel to places where her friends are meeting because she cannot afford it. On the other hand, however, social media has played a critical role in creating spaces where friendships or other caring relationships could form. Noxolo, for example, said she spent a lot of time on LinkedIn asking for and giving advice, and had joined a WhatsApp group for graduates looking for jobs, where:

> "There are people sharing jobs and sharing their experiences. It helps you to prepare yourself for in case you get an interview. Then you understand the dos and don'ts in other people's experiences. And it also helps you to know if a job is not a scam. There are a lot of scam jobs here."

6.2. Educated Mahlalela: the temporalities of everyday unemployment

In Appendix 2 of this thesis is a poem titled "Educated *Mahlalela*". It was written by 27-year-old Noko, a BSc (Hons) Urban and Regional Planning graduate from the University of the Witwatersrand. In the poem, she reflects on the failure of education to generate a present and a future in which she could be "comfortable and never worry about stability", as well as on the challenges she has encountered in her search for a job. I was struck by her use

of the word "*mahlalela*" to describe herself. *Umahlalela* is derived from the isiZulu verb "*ukuhlala*", which means "to sit". The young people that I interviewed repeatedly used a version of the English phrase "I'm just sitting at home" to describe their day-to-day lives, implying (and sometimes overtly stating) that they did "nothing" but just sit at home from one day to the next. But, of course, as Langevang and Gough (2009: 749) have argued (and as I have illustrated in the previous chapter on future-making), we should understand these types of responses as "discursive metaphors" which "symbolise young people's socio-spatial feelings of being stuck" rather than taking them literally. *Umahlalela* is a common colloquial term in South Africa (particularly among Black people, whether native isiZulu speakers or not) (Sefalafala, 2020). It has been used to describe "a shebeen crawler, a sponger on others, and a social liability" (Mzamane, 2009: 196), "unemployed men who roam around the community 'doing nothing'" (Zuma *et al*., 2021: 425) and men who are seen "hanging around street corners… possessing scant qualifications", the man "who is without a job, who sits around and does nothing about it" (Mabena, 2017: 14). In English, one might use the term "loafer". The use of "*mahlalela*" can be traced back to the 1970s, when South Africa started to see a rapid rise in unemployment (Seekings & Nattrass, 2005; Mabena, 2017: 44). Men who had lost their jobs and men who struggled to find work were labelled *omahlalela* because they "just sat around until the sun set on [them]" (Mabena, 2017: 44). As Boehm (2003: 5) notes in the context of Lesotho, a man found in the rural areas (a space that was regarded a terrain for women, and the city a terrain for men), would be "denigrated and called by the derogatory name '*umahlalela*' (a lazy man who does not want to work)". The term's use in a 2018 song titled "*Umahlalela*", by South African Afropop singer Simmy, further demonstrates the way that it has been used and understood. In the song, Simmy complains about unwittingly falling in love with *umahlalela* while other women are dating men who were engaged in waged employment. The music video shows a man who kisses a female romantic partner goodbye in the morning, before laying on the couch and watching TV. Later, the man's friends arrive, and they spend the rest of the day drinking beer and playing board games in the garden.

Young people's use of the term (or the English phrase, "just sitting at home") constitutes a comment about temporality, which they use to reference their struggles with passing an abundant amount of time in their everyday lives. It communicates understandings (and a

judgement) about appropriate or expected uses of time, especially as people who are part of the so-called working age population but are not in work. This is exemplified by Neo (24, female, VUT Chemistry graduate), for example, who states that she is "not in school and not working – just sitting" in response to questions about her everyday life. In this section, I consider how this loafing unsettles expectations about and reshapes relationships with and to time among young unemployed graduates in South Africa. While just sitting at home, time is experienced as unstructured, stretched, superfluous, endless and repetitive. Take, for instance, what the following young people had to say about their everyday lives:

> "Everyday is everyday. It feels like it's the same thing. You check for posts, you apply, you don't hear anything, you're literally just sitting at home." (Semakaleng, 27, female, UP Engineering graduate)

> "… it's just a day for me. It starts and it ends, you know. I just try to get through the day." (Matete, 27, female, UJ Communications graduate)

> "I wake up and have breakfast and watch TV literally the whole day. Every now and then, I check my emails and go into LinkedIn… and that's me. Monday to Friday." (Mpolokeng, 24, female, Wits Biomedical Sciences graduate)

Authors writing about young unemployed men in Niger (Masquelier, 2013), Senegal (Ralph, 2008), Ethiopia (Mains, 2011) and India (Jeffrey, 2010) have written about similar experiences of time, where everyday life among these young men was "experienced as a daily repetition of dull routines structured around the mundane tasks" of sleeping, eating, watching TV and going for walks (Masquelier, 2013: 482). In any of these contexts, this abundance of free time was not experienced as leisure. Unlike the South African men in the music video who are shown to be cheerful and having fun *because* they are not working, the young people that I interviewed were stressed, frustrated and anxious. One of the reasons that this excess time caused them distress was because, as Refilwe (24, male, UP Political Science graduate) explains, "when you're just sitting and not doing anything, you begin to think a lot". In his study on unemployed young men in Ethiopia, Mains (2011) similarly explains that unstructured time was problematic for them because it led them to have too many thoughts. "Thoughts" was a term that was used to convey a broad range of feelings, including stress and depression, but also to describe concerns associated with their relationship to the future (Mains, 2011: 69; Weiss, 2004). Because of this, the need to pass time becomes urgent. The range of activities that young people engaged in to pass time

were similar across the contexts described in the literature and in my own study. Refilwe, for example, wanted to return to university to not only increase his chances of finding work, but also to add structure to time that felt never-ending and to distract himself from his thoughts:

> "I would just pray and sleep so that I don't affect my health because of thinking too much… What I've been doing also is applying for Honour's in both Political Science and Education – just to further my studies so that I avoid things to do with stress and depression. If you're at school, you are able to get busy with the assignments, tests and examinations."

In his study on young men's participation in "timepass" in Uttar Pradesh, India, Jeffrey (2010) similarly highlights the tendency of young people to reinvest in education during times of uncertainty. While, as I discussed in the previous chapter, the desire to start businesses formed part of a broader and longer-term vision of becoming one's own boss, engaging in entrepreneurship was a helpful way of managing time, as Athi (27, female, CPUT Biotechnology graduate) describes below. What she says also conveys anxieties about running out of time as she attempts to attain traditional markers of social adulthood:

> "That's why I ended up doing people's hair. I sit the whole day and that makes me think a lot. So, when I'm busy doing something, that will distract me from thinking of the fact that I'm not working. And the age thing. I feel like that's what is pressurizing me. I feel like I'm old. I don't have a job, I don't have an income, I'm depending on my parents. I'm supposed to be independent and doing everything for myself now and supporting my parents instead of them supporting me. So, it's very frustrating."

There were also young people, like Palesa (25, female, AfDA Live Performance graduate), who managed time using more mundane strategies, like sleeping:

> "I would wake up very late because the days seemed long. So I told myself that I could wake up at twelve (noon), the days can be shorter, then I can go back to sleep. The day must hurry up so that I don't feel that I'm just sitting at home doing nothing."

As Mains (2011: 69) explains, reaching "a state of thoughtlessness" was the desired goal, and activities were evaluated according to whether or not they would help to focus their minds away from thinking too much or to speed up time. These activities can also be understood as attempts to trick time, as I explain in Chapter Two. Ralph (2008) and Jeffrey (2010) argue for the importance of acknowledging the ways in which these forms of time

wasting allow for the construction of new forms of productivity. Ralph (2008: 20) shows that in contrast to local public discourse about lazy youth sitting around and drinking tea all day, the young men in his study use tea-making to establish an expertise and proficiency that undermines widespread belief that their days are completely wasted in tea houses. Similarly, Jeffrey (2010) argues that engagement in what young men called "timepass" was not *just* a solution to their problems of excessive time, but also constituted a cultural political practice because timepass (which involves hanging out on street corners and in tea stalls) provided opportunities to gain knowledge about local politics and the informal economy, and to make social and political connections. By making a distinction between "work" and "labour", I have made a different but related argument in the previous chapter about how the future is engaged through a variety of labours performed in the everyday lives of unemployed youth. Despite the busy-ness, however, young people still described themselves as *omahlalela* because their everyday experience of time was shaped as much by what they *weren't* doing as what they were doing.

In a neoliberal context, where formal waged work is glorified as the most important source of income (alongside entrepreneurship) and a signifier of identity, respect and status, any other uses of time among people who *should* be working are disparaged or seen as wasted time (Standing, 2013). As Jeffrey (2010: 80) states about the young men he studies in India, "timepass was what one had to do in a context in which other more meaningful and 'serious' ways of engaging with the world were unavailable". Young people's loafing is seen as an obstruction to the neoliberal dream (or myth) of full employment as they evoke temporalities that are distinct and disconnected from the tempo and structure of industrious life. Siphokazi (unknown age, female, Rhodes Economics graduate), for example, reflects on how excess time becomes highlighted during the working week:

> "I think Mondays are the most depressing days 'cause you realise that you have absolutely nothing to do the whole weekdays. On the weekends, you get to see your friends, you get to go out and everyone is home."

Athi makes similar reflections about her own days:

> "I wouldn't even go outside. My neighbours would even be shocked when they see me and say, 'You're still here?' I would just be in my room on WhatsApp and those social networks, having nothing to do. Or just do the house chores. It was

> just stressful because you have nothing to do. You wake up, clean the rooms, cook, you wash yourself, you go back to bed. Cause in most cases, you're thinking, I should be working. I am talking to no one because people are busy working. I even ended up drinking the sleeping pills because I am sleeping the whole day and, at night, I don't feel like sleeping."

Siphokazi and Athi point to the relational aspects involved in how they experience time in their everyday lives. Contrasted against the temporalities of people who are engaged in work or are still in school, the properties that make up the temporalities of loafing are foregrounded. The relational aspects are a theme that I return to in the next section. However, nested within convictions about neoliberal uses of time are harsh, disparaging judgements that equate joblessness with laziness and defective character traits. These judgements, which adults make about youth (i.e.: Masquelier, 2013) and which youth make about themselves, are central to and communicated within the idea of being *umahlalela.*

Loafing is not practised in the same way across different contexts. As Jeffrey (2010) argues in the context of Uttar Pradesh, engaging in timepass (or engaging in particular forms of timepass) is gendered and classed. Due to local cultural and religious norms, young women were unable to participate in the kinds of public timepass in which the young men were engaged in because it was considered inappropriate for young women to "hang out", except in certain socially acceptable public spaces (Jeffrey, 2010: 77). But women also didn't have the same amount of time to pass because they had daily domestic chores to complete, whereas young men were rarely expected to participate very actively in any household labour (Jeffrey, 2010: 76). In South Africa, the way that the term "*umahlalela*" has been used has a gendered history, and conveys particular ideas about gender roles and employment. However, as more women have the desire to and are forced to enter the formal waged labour market, the term simultaneously widens to include any working age person who is not in employment – resulting in young women like Noko using it to refer to themselves. And even though, like in Jeffrey's (2010) study, young women's descriptions of their everyday lives featured the completion of daily household tasks, the repetitiveness of these tasks, from one day to next, contributed to the experience of time as a constant loop. Jeffrey (2010) also notes that timepass served as a way to signal one's class status in India. The young men hanging out on street corners were often relatively privileged and chose to wait

in order to avoid "low status work" (Jeffrey, 2010). They advertised their loafing through a public "masculine youth culture that challenged the dominant temporal logics of their parents and the state" (Jeffrey, 2010: 2). Meanwhile, among unemployed young men in Ethiopia, Mains (2011) explains that they preferred to hang out in khat and video houses because it allowed them to escape the public gaze, "so that one's unemployment was not advertised for all to see". However, my findings among unemployed graduates in South Africa differ in two ways. First, the young people that I interviewed aren't choosing to wait, they are forced to wait because even "low status work" is hard to secure (see Chapter One and Chapter Five). And secondly, I found that while young people often wanted to avoid being seen in public for fear of being shamed, they also yearned for more public and geographically stretched out lives in order to distinguish themselves from uneducated loafers. Mpolokeng, for example, said that because she was "sitting at home", she often forgot that she was a graduate:

> "I'm not doing anything… I'm just sitting at home like everyone else who didn't go to school… What's there to show that I went to school compared to someone who didn't really go to school and who's doing the same thing that I do every single day?"

As Robinson (2009) argues about young people in the UK, the spaces and places that we inhabit (like the street, the park, the home) are instrumental in the establishment, negotiation and performance of youth identity. This process is relational because it is reliant on establishing differences and similarities between individuals and groups (Hopkins, 2010), in this instance, who are sitting at home because they are uneducated and those who are educated but are struggling to secure any work. And according to Ayanda (25, female, UNISA Communications graduate), people who were engaged in productive uses of time were people who left the township every morning, with a packed lunch bag in hand, to catch a taxi to work or school and return in the evenings. Therefore, her aim was to participate in this daily form of mobility instead of living the intensely local life that she was currently living:

> "It wasn't a pleasant feeling – seeing people wake up every day, going about their lives and going to their work. We would just talk with my friends and say that we see people walk with their lunch bags and all of that. We told ourselves that one day, that's gonna be us carrying our lunch bags. We just envy people

> who we would see carrying their lunch bags, coming from work at night. We would tell ourselves that one day that's gonna be us."

As a result, loafing, in this context, was practised mostly inside the home, where young people passed the time by sleeping, watching TV, scrolling through Twitter and talking to friends and acquaintances online. Some young people, like Ayanda, hung out with neighbourhood friends and occasionally went to the local mall to run errands. However, they were rarely unable to leave their local physical geographies. While they were not doing "nothing", unemployment played a significant role in limiting young people's mobility and the spaces/places that they had access to. This loafing (*ukuhlalela*), I argue in the section that follows, poses a challenge to heteronormative conceptualisations of the life course and social reproduction, and plays a significant role in shaping (as well as being shaped by) everyday social relations between families and friends.

6.3. A relational approach to everyday unemployment

> "I can see that I am not alone in this journey. I have people that I can count on that, if maybe I get an interview and I don't have money to travel, it means I can get it from them and they'll be able to help so that I can attend the interview. Or if there are vacancies that I don't know about, they are there and they share them so that I can see through and go and apply. If it's near, I will go and apply. If it's far or close to where they are, they say 'Just send your documents or email them, I will go and submit on your behalf.' Some even go to the extent that they use their own money if it's a bit far from them but just around their region. Or use their car and their petrol. It really means a lot that they are sacrificing my cost on their own budget." (Refilwe, 24, male, UP Political Science graduate)

Nicola Ansell (2008) argues that there are certain dramatic events, like famine, which can alter accepted conventions around social reproduction. In her research, she highlights the effects that the HIV/Aids epidemic has had on the capacity of parents and families in Lesotho to care for children as adults become sick or pass on (and thus struggle to fulfil the social reproduction role that is generally expected of them). She explores the extent to which schools play a substituting role for families in social reproduction (Ansell, 2008). She argues that although small-scale, day-to-day interventions carried out by individual teachers driven by their own emotional responses are significant to thousands of children, schools need to be seen as more than just producers of human capital for the economy if they are to play a more meaningful social reproductive role (Ansell, 2008). Social reproduction is part of the

"fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life" (Katz, 2001: 711). Ansell (2008: 3) notes that social reproduction, defined by geographers as "the interdependent reproduction both of the social relations within which, and the material and discursive means through which, social life is premised, sustained and transformed over time" (Lee, 200: 760) or the "material and social practices through which people reproduce themselves on a daily and generational basis" (Katz, 2001: 711), is not simply instrumental to capitalism. Social reproduction is essential for the sustenance and welfare of any society, family or individuals, and the work involved is often motivated by a range of emotions, moral commitments and a sense of responsibility (Ansell, 2008: 8). I argue that unemployment, similarly, poses challenges for young people in South Africa to fulfil the social reproduction roles that are generally expected of them. Despite it not being a reality for the overwhelming majority, young people continue to imagine their lives (and progress) as moving along a linear (often heteronormative) trajectory, through which ideas about the roles that people should play along that trajectory are communicated and internalised. The young people that I interviewed expected to be playing the role of provider, to both the families that they make and to the families that raised them. Instead, they still live at home and are financially reliant on their families and intimate others. Building on Ansell's (2008) work, I reflect not only on how ideas and practices of social reproduction are in flux due to unemployment and young people's loafing, but also on how the relational geographies that are intertwined with social reproduction are both shaped by and shape unemployment. As both Noxolo's story and Refilwe's words demonstrate, relationships figure centrally in everyday unemployment. I am, therefore, interested in exploring exactly how relationships feature as well as how they can shape or be shaped by unemployment – in particular, shaped by feeling like and being perceived as a loafer/*umahlalela*.

As I have outlined in Chapter Two, Hall (2019b), who builds on Massey's (2004; 2005) work on relational space, argues that paying attention to relational geographies of family, friendships and other intimate relations offers rich possibilities for understanding socio-economic and political crises like, as she studies, austerity in the UK (as it lived and felt by ordinary people in their everyday lives). In the remainder of this section, I explore family and friendships as the relationships that represent the core of everyday unemployed life. I show that while family support, for most, is essential for material survival, friendships play a

more significant role in providing emotional support. However, both sets of relations are characterised as much by warmth as they are by tensions.

6.3.1. Family relationships

As I have already established, these young people are unable to make kin in traditional heteronormative ways because they are stuck at home. And while a few of the young people that I interviewed lamented the difficulty of getting married and having children under their current circumstances, almost all of them placed greater emphasis on the daily stress of not being able to financially provide for their parents, grandparents and other members of their families. Among many societies in the global South, including South Africa, young adults are expected to take over the role of provider, to the young children who cannot work and to the elders who are no longer able to (i.e.: Evans *et al*., 2019). At the core of these intergenerational contracts are concerns with reciprocity: the young people are reciprocating the support that the elder family members gave in raising and providing for them while also providing support to the young children in the hopes that it will one day be reciprocated. However, as Noxolo's reflections about what she has done and hopes to do for her brothers illustrates, the expectation of reciprocity is not automatic and is fraught with feelings of uncertainty, the fear of putting too much pressure on others but also faith that her sacrifices will one day be reciprocated. In South Africa, these forms of intergenerational transfers are sometimes referred to as "Black tax". The term, which is contentious, typically refers to financial contributions that young Black professionals are expected to make to less fortunate family members, usually in the form of buying groceries for one or more households, paying the school fees for younger relatives or contributing (sometimes significantly) to the cost of building a new family home. The evidence in the study conducted by Whitelaw *et al*. (2020: 8) shows that there is an element of responsibility for providing financial support that arises from the status of being a graduate alone.

This pressure to support family is intensified by the (financial) sacrifices that families had to make in order to get these graduates into and through their university education, with the hopes that it will have substantial returns for the individual but especially for the family. As I discussed in Chapter Four, young people faced significant financial challenges that prevented them from gaining access to their institution or degree programme of choice. For many,

these challenges persisted well into their studies, with the young people that I interviewed reporting that they faced financial exclusion in every year of their studies or have had to go without food because their NSFAS allowance was not sent on time. They weren't the only young people experiencing this. Since 2015, university students across the country filled the streets in protest against unaffordable and rising university fees. And in 2021, at the time that I was conducting these interviews with unemployed graduates, students in Johannesburg were still protesting over their ability to register for the new academic year despite not having cleared their historical debt (Nkanjeni, 2021). In these situations, family – parents, siblings, aunts, grandmothers – stepped in to provide the means to ensure that these young people could get into and stay in education. However, as the following quotes demonstrate, this resulted in feelings of intense pressure to reciprocate the support that they received and to fulfil their expected social reproduction roles. But young people also framed it as a form of motivation that kept them going, especially when they felt hopeless:

> "[My grandmother] is not working. She's selling clothes. And I have a cousin, also. They mostly live by their grants. That's how they survive the month. At home, I am the first one [to graduate]. So you can imagine the pressure. At home, they are looking at me like, 'You did engineering. You're graduating. That's nice. You need to buy us this and this.' I feel so much pressure." (Nomfundo, 22, female, DUT Engineering graduate)

> "When I look at my family I can't just give up. What will they do without me working? They made it possible for me to go to school. They sacrificed a lot. Other months, they didn't buy groceries for themselves so that I can pay my rent. Giving up is not an option for me when I look at my family." (Lerato, 24, female, TUT Chemistry graduate)

> "Everyone is counting on me to give them a good life. They sacrificed a lot for me to be where I am at the moment. I have to make sure that I repay them, to appreciate their love and sacrifices… Once I start working, I want to build my mom a house. That's the main reason that has kept me going at the moment." (Nhlanhla, 30, male, Wits Engineering graduate)

While young people sought to find activities in their everyday lives that helped them to pass what felt like slow, excessive time, these relationships with family, and the expectation and/or desire to repay them for what they had "invested" into their education simultaneously contributed to feelings that they were running out of time. This became a source of anxiety for Semakaleng (27, female, UP Engineering graduate):

> "There are so many things I want to do for my grandmother. The first project for me when I start working is to start fixing up at home – my grandmother's house. Even now in her old age as a pensioner, she still shares the little that she gets with me. She has sacrificed so much just to make sure that I finish this degree. She's invested in me and my future. I want to do so much for her, and sometimes the fact that I'm unemployed is taking so long really stresses me because I feel like she doesn't have much time left to live."

As Semakaleng mentions, with no employment and little support from the state, families constitute an important source of resilience, and especially material (financial) support for the majority of the unemployed graduates that I interviewed – no matter how little the families had. When Nsindiso (25, female, DUT Biotechnology graduate) spoke about her family and how they had supported her while she was unemployed, feelings of relief, comfort and pride radiated through the phone:

> "My siblings are like my go-to superheroes. I have support. I won't lie… You won't tell that I'm not working. I live with my little sister. Yes, she's working. So she covers most of the things and she helps me with applications. She prints and photocopies at work when I need her to. She does not complain at all. Same as my bigger brother. They are like that. 'Do you need anything?' They are right here if I say that there is something I need and they know that, financially, I am not that good. They would cut off their legs for me. They make sure that I don't feel any kind of way because I'm not working."

While Nsindiso's family was able to support her using the salaries that they earned from employment, other young people relied on social grants shared between members of the household, and often supplemented with informal (self-)employment and kin-based redistributions because, as it is generally agreed, the social grants are hardly enough for the intended recipient of one person:

> "The income that we use in the house is from my sister with the disability and the one for my mom being sixty [old age pension]. Then [my mom] sells stuff. We do gardening in the house, so people come and buy things like sweet potatoes and spinach." (Sibahle, 27, female, UJ Engineering graduate)

> "I was staying with both my parents and my little brother and sister. My dad was working and my mom wasn't working. So the only source of income was my dad and also the social grants for my two siblings. I also got help from my brother who was staying here in Pretoria. He could help there and there." (Lufuno, 25, female, VUT Engineering graduate)

This kind of support is significant in relieving the pressure of unemployment that is related to day-to-day survival. However, of course, the level of material support varied across families. In Noxolo's case, for example, her mother, who was the main breadwinner, passed away and her eldest brother was not able to find a job to support them – which caused a lot of tension between them. Similarly, Sipho (28, male, TUT Engineering graduate) had to find ways to provide for himself because his family was unable to:

> "I am not being supported by family. I am coming from the Eastern Cape, from a disadvantaged background. My parents are not working. In order for me to get money, I need to think outside the box of how I'm going to get money today in order for me to eat something."

All over the world, scholars have noted that youth are increasingly financially dependent on their parents into their adult years (Johnnson-Hanks, 2017). As a result, they argue that in contexts of a retreating state and various economic crises, we should revitalise a focus on family relationships – while still acknowledging that family structures have changed over the years and are diverse across different geographical contexts (Hall, 2019b: 29). Family still matters because it represents the set of relations, practices and intimacies which are important for understanding how people get by in times of economic crisis (Valentine, 2008: 2098; Valentine & Hughes, 2011). However, it's important to refrain from romanticising these relations, as families can be characterised as much by love and affection as by tensions and conflict.

One area in which many young people felt unsupported by their families was emotionally, as Kamo (27, female, UNISA, Business Management) conveys:

> "Support comes in many ways. There are times when you need emotional support and times when you need physical support. Only thing I will say my family thrives in is supporting me financially. But the emotional part, it's not nice."

Not all young people described experiencing this. Lerato (24, female, TUT Chemistry graduate), for example, said that she received the greatest emotional support from her mother:

> "The only person that makes me calm down is my mom. She's always there for me. She's always giving me positive advice. So after I talk to her, I feel much better… She will always make me see my potential."

However, her experience was in the minority. For others, being at home all day started to strain their relationships with their families. Sinovuyo (unknown age, female, UCT Sociology graduate), for example, didn't feel that her parents could understand what she was going through, which was frustrating:

> "My friends, because we are a younger generation as compared to our parents, they will obviously know that you are going through the most and you will be able to speak to them and they will understand because maybe some of them have gone through this or currently going through this. But it's difficult with our parents because when they were our age, it was not as difficult to find employment. For example, my mom, she knows that I don't like not being employed but I don't think she knows the extent to which this unemployment is affecting me. I'm a person who does my own thing. I'm independent… Now things are changing a bit because I am running out of my own financial resources, so now I have to say, 'Hey, can I please have toiletries?' And, also, for some things you really can't ask. Especially for recreational things. It's difficult, because our parents will say, 'You want to go have fun but you don't—' You know, let me not do this. It's difficult, man. They don't understand the extend of the things that we go through."

In the section that follows, I show that friendships are not without similar tensions. But in terms of family, Felicia (24, female, UL Chemistry graduate) shared similar sentiments to Sinovuyo's:

> "At home, I stay with my grandmother, who is old, and my mom. And they think maybe because I'm a graduate, things are gonna be easy for me. And they ask me, 'Are you really applying?' when I am applying. When people ask me about that, I think in their mind they think I'm just sitting and I enjoy sleeping here at home the whole day without even doing anything. It's not easy… I think these people [family and community] think that because I'm from university, I should get a job without even applying because I'm a graduate."

This tension can partly be explained by intergenerational differences – especially for first generation university graduates. What Felicia says reveals the ways in which older generations understand university education and the expectations that they have for it to open up opportunities immediately. Their expectations are not unfounded, and the young people themselves started university and their job searches with similar expectations. Even

though young people sometimes blame themselves for not having secured a job, their interactions with other young people on LinkedIn, who are in similar situations, reminds them that there are structural issues that prevent them from being able to find work. But their families don't have the same interactions and information, and so can make harsh judgements about the effort that young people are making to find a job. Furthermore, the temporalities of loafing (in contrast to expected "nine to five" temporalities) and young people's very limited physical mobilities can cause suspicion among parents. While, back in their day, job-seeking might have involved waking up and getting on the same taxi as those who are going to work in order to submit your CV at various places (much like what Mwaura (2017) describes as "tarmacking" in Kenya), young people today don't have to leave their houses or their bedrooms to apply for work. Especially when families are unfamiliar with digital technologies, which in this case we can reasonably assume of Felicia's family, who she lives with in rural Limpopo, young people's days can look like they are being wasted away as they pass the majority of the day at home, and, from the perspectives of their parents, staring at a phone or computer screen. To avoid having to answer questions about whether they were *really* applying, young people like Felicia tried to spend their time away from family, usually locked in their bedrooms, talking to friends, scrolling through their social media feeds or watching their favourite TV shows online.

6.3.2. Friendships

Scholars of human geography have noted that, despite its importance in contemporary life, friendship remains an "absent presence" in the discipline (Bunnell *et al*., 2011; Hall, 2019b; Dyson, 2010). Bunnell *et al*. (2011) argue that while friendship features in some of the human geography literature, it is rarely directly engaged with as a concept. The authors argue for foregrounding friendship as a concept in human geography research, and they offer three strands of existing geographical work that can help push the research on friendship forward: geographies of affect and emotion, geographies of children and youth, and geographies of mobility and transnationality (Bunnell *et al*., 2011: 498 - 503). In addition to this article, which is instructive, works by Mains (2013) and Dyson (2010) provide empirical analyses of friendship that place these relationships within everyday practices in specific social, cultural and temporal contexts. Based on his research on unemployed young men in Jimma, Ethiopia, Mains (2013: 336) argues for a broad understanding of friendship,

one which “does not assume that calculation and self-interest conflict with affection”. Friendship among young men in Jimma, according to Mains (2013), could be described as a relationship founded on material support combined with practices of affection and social interaction. Given that these young men are unemployed, sharing, gifting and helping are understood to be essential to the core meaning of being a friend. While factors such as having common interests, living in the same neighbourhood and sharing a religion were important in determining who one should be friends with, young people emphasised that it was the willingness to give or invite that made someone a good friend (Mains, 2013). As a result, goods were constantly exchanged between friends, creating complex webs of reciprocity. Mains (2013) says that some of the young men described the sharing and gifting among friends as a form of insurance. In the context of uncertainty and scarcity of resources, the young men argued that sharing with others increased the likelihood of others sharing with them when they are in need. However, young men were cautious about asking too much of others while not being in a position to reciprocate for a long time, as people who were too instrumental in their relationships caused tensions. Reciprocation wasn’t always about giving a gift in return for a gift given, but was also about returning gifts with the kind of affection that is associated with friendships, like passing time together, talking and sharing ideas (Mains, 2013: 338). While, for example, purchasing a coffee for a friend was an important gift, spending time together in the café is also important, as it allows them to create spaces of leisure and engage in activities that can create or strengthen friendship bonds. Mains (2013: 342) also argues that while all relationships are affected by economic crisis, the ambiguous and flexible nature of friendship (unlike kin or romantic/sexual relationships) reduces the conflicts among friends.

Dyson’s (2010) research on girls’ leaf-collecting work in the Indian Himalayas similarly illustrates that affection and self-interest are inextricable in friendships. She identifies work (the forests in which the girls collected leaves) as a key site for the production and performance of friendship. In this context, friendship wasn’t just “an affective relationship born out of shared leisure interests or mutual appreciation of each other’s personality”, but was related to concerns about earning a livelihood but also meeting local moral ideals about work, gender and maturity (Dyson, 2010: 491). Good friends, therefore, were girls who worked diligently, were open to helping each other and concerned with behaving in

accordance with local social and cultural norms (Dyson, 2010). Dyson (2010: 495) argues that among these girls, friendship is a contradictory resource: once girls are in a trusted group, the friendship provides social freedoms, giving girls opportunities to experiment with identities, but the friendships also worked to further entrench dominant local norms.

As Bunnell *et al*. (2011) state, any geographical account of friendship cannot attempt to understand and define it separately from kinship and other intimate relationships. As I have shown in the previous section, unemployment, and, especially, feeling like and feeling perceived to be *umahlalela* creates shifts in everyday life that blur and challenge relational or social reproduction roles, potentially enhancing the role of friendship in maintaining emotional wellbeing through the challenges of unemployment. While there are important distinctions between friendship and kinship (see Bunnell *et al*. (2011: 493) & Hall (2019b) for this discussion), these relationships (and others) overlap in significant ways to shape how young people could experience everyday unemployment. Nakassis (2014), for instance, writes about how young people attending college in Tamil Nadu (India) draw on aspects and logics of kinship and kin terms to invoke a kin-like relatedness among friends, while simultaneously turning ideas about kinship "inside out and on its head" (Nakassis, 2014: 182). These kinds of constructions of friendship that imply a closeness or a bond similar to that of kinship has important implications for what friends can claim or expect from one another. Other scholars emphasise that friendships can play a complementary, or even, in some ways, a substitution role in relation to family relations. In the context of Singapore, for example, Ramdas (2014) shows how young single women include their friends in how they care for their elderly parents, because this allows the young women to cope with the day-to-day stresses that this provision of care produces. Trott (2020) argues that the reproduction of queer life requires the ability to access or to create spaces that allow for the construction of alternative forms of kinship. The friendships, networks and kin-like structures that they create outside of the home and on the internet are what can make queer life liveable and desirable (Trott, 2020). And Masquelier (2013), similarly, highlights that not only are Nigerien *fadas* (young men's conversation groups) a space for youth sociality, but they also act as a space where youth can adopt the role of surrogate kin for one another when unemployed young men stop talking to their parents and feel rejected by disapproving and judgemental adults in their households. The discussion that follows builds

on this literature, highlighting the ways in which friendships are defined, made and sustained in South Africa.

Friends featured in different ways in young people's experiences of unemployment. Similar to what Dyson (2010) and Mains (2011) have illustrated, friendships are not just about fun and pleasure, they are essential to physical, mental and emotional wellbeing (Bunnell *et al*., 2011). While (some) families can (sometimes) provide material and financial support, for some young people, friends were able to step in when families were not able to provide. Noxolo's friends, and her romantic partner, offered her places to stay and often sent her money to buy data. And Zama's (23, female, UJ Finance graduate) friends did the same for her:

> "All my friends went back to school and they did their postgrads. But they don't forget to send me posts when they see something that could be related to what I studied, or talk to other people and say, 'Zama needs a job. If you have any space, could you please let her know.' They send me money. I was struggling with data, and my friends would pitch in. Someone would send me airtime so I can buy data and apply for work. Or should I need to go to an interview, I know that if my family doesn't have money to give me for the taxi fare, then I know that I have friends who would be willing to assist me with that."

In addition to providing financial support, friends contributed to their job searching efforts. However, they did not have the kind of influential friends that made them better placed to compete in the labour market (Bourdieu, 2011). What both Noxolo and Zama say suggests that an aspect of friendship that they value is that their friends are always thinking about them and being proactive in their support. But one thing that could put a strain on these friendships, as Noxolo has pointed out about her reluctance to ask her more "connected" friends to help her find a job, is having to ask for help constantly or directly. Noxolo felt that by virtue of her friends knowing her situation, they should've been willing to help without her having to ask them directly.

An area in which these young people felt that friends were most supportive was in being there for them emotionally. Having someone to talk to, as Madumelane (27, female, UJ Construction graduate) discusses, is essential for their wellbeing and their ability to carry on:

> "Sometimes talking about things helps. It helps to heal the wounds. Because, sometimes, when you're in a dark, depressing space, like I'm in, you can easily take your life. But when you have friends and you have support, and people say, 'No, you'll get the job. Don't worry about it. Just keep on applying. Everything will work out at the right time,' it gives you a sane mind for you to be able to go through the day."

But it was especially helpful to speak to friends who are in, or have been in, similar circumstances, because they just "get it", as Mable (24, female, UJ Communications graduate) explains:

> "When I talk to my friends, they relate. I think the most important thing is talking to someone and they relate to what you're going through… then it's easy to share all these things, the frustrations and all that. Because sometimes you just wake up and you're tired of job hunting. A fried will say, 'No, let's just continue and something will come up.' But, now, if you're talking to someone who is working already and then *wena* you come with your, 'Oh, I feel like giving up', the person will be like, 'Nah, you're lazy.'"

For most of these young people, their friendships had to be maintained online. The friends that they reference above are friends that they made in university. However, they all had to move back to their rural or township homes, which were often hundreds of kilometres away from the universities in which those friendships were made. They used WhatsApp to keep in touch. As Williams *et al*. (2021) note, digital technologies, like smartphones and social media messaging apps, (re)shaped how connections between people are formed and maintained. In particular, the authors discuss how WhatsApp is marketed through use of the spatiotechnical concept of "the digital living room", which evokes ideas of "security, trust and familiarity in and through which people can come together, share news and information, and nurture feelings of belonging" (Williams *et al*., 2021: 307). WhatsApp not only allowed friends who were now separated to continue to keep in touch, through text messages, voice calls, video calls and voice messages, but the privacy also provided the space for them to be themselves and to be vulnerable with those closest to them, without the fear of being judged for being lazy. The centrality of digital and online tools for the maintenance of friendships stands in contrast to the literatures of unemployed young men, whose friendships are made and maintained in the physical spaces of the streets, café's, *fadas* and video houses (Masquelier, 2013; Ralph, 2008; Mains, 2011; Jeffrey, 2010; Pettit, 2019). It also challenges literatures which insist that physical proximity/material spaces "constitute

the key technologies of friendship" (Bunnell *et al*., 2011: 491). However, literatures on queer people's experiences in various contexts highlight the importance, for queer people, of online spaces for accessing and creating queer-related content, socialisation and a sense of belonging (alongside the violence that they encounter on the internet as well) (Trott, 2020; Jenzen, 2017).

While apps like WhatsApp were key for the maintenance of close, supportive friendships, more public sites like LinkedIn created new spaces of sociality and solidarities among unemployed graduates. As Hall (2019a: 780) argues, new "care-full" relationships and opportunities for sociability can emerge during times of economic crisis. And while not all of the online acquaintances will become close friends, the relationships that they form online can still be intimate and offer a sense of belonging and conviviality. Below, Matete, Vhonani and Mpho reflect on the ways in which connecting with others online has been valuable for them:

> "I feel like it's a community and it helps a lot. Because sometimes you just want to know that you're not the only one. There's actually a lot of us who are graduates and are still looking for opportunities out there. Just knowing that you're not the only one, it gives you hope to just go on, try more." (Matete, 27, female, UJ Communications graduate)

> "Applying for jobs, no response or it's just a regret. It's very depressing every day. And people try to comfort me… These people are the ones who I connected with on LinkedIn. Others, they took my number and we communicate almost every day, trying to support me saying that my time will come and not to give up. Those guys, they are giving me the support that I need. If it was not for LinkedIn, *eish*, it would be difficult for me. Even at home, sometimes they think that I am not applying for jobs. And I tell them that I do apply, every day. It's just that my chance is not coming yet. It's very depressing." (Vhonani, 27, male, UNIVEN Administration graduate)

> "You meet people on LinkedIn and they support you. Once you post that you're unemployed, you get tagged on posts [advertising job vacancies]. I even have people who, after I posted my story, they sent me job emails. There was specifically this guy, I am grateful for him, he asked his company's HR to contact me… You even make friends on LinkedIn. I was able to assist this one girl who was struggling to register at Vaal University of Technology. I also met friends who buy my products from LinkedIn." (Mpho, 27, female, VUT Chemistry graduate)

Among unemployed young men in India, Jeffrey (2010) argues that “timepass” functioned as a kind of intimate culture: it was a part of their lives that was “somewhat embarrassing when exposed to outsiders but viewed by insiders as a basis for shoring up community spirit and building trust” (Jeffrey, 2010: 95). “Humour, horseplay and banter”, Jeffrey (2010: 95) notes, were a prominent part of the men’s timepass activities, where many of the jokes were reflections of the hardships of being young and unemployed. I observed something similar among young, unemployed graduates in South Africa. Young people complained that one of the barriers that they faced in the labour market was “the lack of experience”. They said that they often came across job descriptions for entry-level jobs that asked for candidates with years of experience. As a result, jokes about experience were common on LinkedIn, and received a lot of engagement from other young people. For example, one of the graduates that I interviewed posted the following picture, which he captioned: “How it feels applying for entry-level vacancies that require fifteen years of working experience and post-graduate qualifications”. The post was reacted to with as many laughing emojis as it did sad emojis.

Figure 7: Screenshot of meme about years of experience required

However, friendships weren’t always a source of support for young people. Felicia, for instance, shared that the friends in her neighbourhood made remarks that were similar to those that her mother and grandmother had made:

> "From friends, I can't say that I get support from them because some of them, they don't understand the struggle of not getting a job. They will be like, 'Ja, you are lazy to apply. That's why you don't get a job.'… Most of them, they didn't go to university. So, in their mind, they thought that after going to university, it's easy to get a job. That's why they say to me I'm lazy, because they haven't got the experience we're having."

Because the everyday lives of unemployed graduates are intensely local, the opportunities for socialising with their peers are based mostly in and around their neighbourhoods. However, when they are one of very few people in their communities to graduate from universities, these friendships are at risk of dissolving because of the differences between what the graduates are doing and what their local/childhood friends think they should be doing. Because of these judgements, feelings of shame can lead them to withdraw from both physical and digital spaces of sociability and avoid interacting with people, as Siphokazi has shared about her own experience:

> "I was in Grahamstown and I wanted to go visit— I'm lying. I wated to go party. I bumped into a few of my last year friends but I wanted to keep the conversation short so they don't ask what I'm doing this year. Those questions are very triggering."

She goes on to talk about how she's limited her use of some social media apps because she's anxious about how her peers perceive her:

> "Especially from people I used to go to school with. Every time they ask me what I was doing next year, I would always say 'I am going to work'. Now they see that I have two university qualifications but I'm not— what am I doing? 'You said you're going to work but we don't see you posting things [on social media]. All you're posting is memes.' So, what's going on sister?' They obviously don't ask but I know what they think because I used to talk a lot. Now I'm sure they're really thinking when I post, 'What is this girl doing with her life?' That's a good question… Also, seeing your peers doing their thing is great but also— that's why I deleted Instagram, because it's a lot of pressure."

Papacharissi and Easton (2013) have described Instagram as a site for dramatization and performativity. The app has become one of the most popular ways for people to share visual representations of their everyday lives. It is known for contributing to pressures to adhere to particular beauty, consumption and lifestyle ideals, as people create and engage with the most refined and polished content. For Siphokazi, who can't participate in this performance,

the pressure becomes unbearable. Dyson (2010) also highlights that as much as friendships can provide opportunities for experimenting, they can also serve as sites for social monitoring, which Siphokazi feels anxious about, even though people haven't said the things that she thinks that they are thinking to her directly.

6.4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored the relational geographies of everyday unemployment by bringing together discussions on time and discussions on family and friends, which represent the core relationships in everyday life. I begin by unpacking the meaning of the term "*umahlalela*", and its English translation, "just sitting at home", to argue that it constitutes a comment, by these young people, about how they experience time. Just like the unemployed young men in the literature that I have cited, young people like Noxolo aimed to do things that prevented them from "thinking too much". I've shown that, unlike in other contexts, where loafing was a very public cultural practice, young people in South Africa are passing most of their time indoors, when their desire is to be outside - practicing or experiencing the temporalities and mobilities that are associated with being a young professional. In the second section, I have framed unemployment as one of those "dramatic events" (Ansell, 2008) that has the potential to (re)shape conventions around social reproduction, but also interpersonal relationships. I illustrated that while, for most young people, their families are able to provide the material support that they need to survive, there are intergenerational disconnections that cause tension between the graduates and their families, which lead to a lack of emotional support. I then turned to look at the ways in which friends are able to plug this gap, being there to listen to the frustration of their unemployed friends. However, I also showed the ways in which tensions could arise between friends in ways that limit young people's opportunities for sociality. Across these discussions about friendship, I have illustrated the role that the internet and social media plays in both providing and creating opportunities for support and conviviality but also creating spaces where young people feel as though they are being monitored, thus causing them to retreat from particular digital spaces.

In making these arguments, I have made three main contributions to the literature on everyday temporalities as well as the relational geographies of family and friends. First, I

have provided an empirical, situated account of how young South African graduates experience time in their everyday lives. Second, I have shown the importance of family in times of economic crisis, as they tend to form the primary method through which people are able to survive. However, I have also highlighted how unemployment can make family relationships more difficult. Finally, I have responded to calls from human geographers to feature friendships more predominantly in geographical work. While there are more ways in which friendship could be made more central, I have contributed to ongoing efforts to broaden geographers' maps of where and how friendships and other relationships are constructed. I have highlighted digital communication, especially WhatsApp, as a key site for maintaining friendships. But I have also highlighted more public social media websites as crucial for creating relationships of solidary which may or may not grow into stronger friendship bonds. I have also contributed to understandings about what friendship is from the perspective of my participants. As in other studies, gifts, spending time together and reciprocity were key to what makes a good friend, but also the ability of one to anticipate another's needs.

7 Conclusions: What now?

7.1. The future of work

During an election campaign in Orange Farm in 2024, President Ramaphosa was approached by a young woman (Nemakonde, 2024). Her name was Slindokuhle Khoza, and she was a 22-year old BA Communications graduate from North-West University. She graduated in 2022 and has been searching for a job that will allow her to take care of herself and her unemployed mother. She decided to join the campaign because she hoped to meet and talk to someone who might help her get a job. She approached the president directly, when the following interaction was recorded (Nemakonde, 2024):

> "So, you're looking for work now?" asks Ramaphosa
>
> She responds, "Yes, I am. I've been searching online."
>
> "Yeah, you must keep searching. You must also register on the SA Youth Mobi app," was his response, which caused an uproar on Twitter.

In May 2024, thirty years into the young democracy, South Africans will vote in the seventh democratic national election. Elections are all about the future. As the day draws nearer, political parties visit homes, churches, university campuses, and they host rallies in which they make promises about a better South Africa for all. These promises are accompanied by (often vague) plans for how they are going to achieve the overarching goal of a better future for all. The results from this election are highly anticipated, as some have predicted that the ANC may lose its majority for the first time since the first democratic election in 1994 (Imray, 2024; Naidoo, 2023). It is argued that the ANC is losing voters over three hot button issues: the electricity crisis, rampant corruption and record unemployment (Imray, 2024). Ramaphosa's ANC has promised, in their 2024 election manifesto, to "focus on six priorities that are critical to speeding up transformation and improving the lives of the people": creating jobs, building industries, tackling the cost of living; investing in people, defending democracy, and building a better Africa and world (ANC, 2024: 2). Regarding priority one, the ANC's goal is to create 2.5 million "work opportunities" over five years through the public employment programmes (ANC, 2024: 5). In addition to creating "work opportunities", they aim to support entrepreneurs and engage the private sector on creating

additional jobs (ANC, 2014: 4). However, these proposals are not dissimilar to what Ramaphosa has already proposed and implemented during his first term in office from 2018 to the present (2024), which has not only not made much of a difference but unemployment rates have increased under his leadership (Nkosi, 2022).

Under these circumstances, I often think about the young people that I spoke to and wonder about where they are now and about their future trajectories. After speaking to Thabo for the first time in 2021, we kept in touch intermittently over a few months. He was still looking for work. He often asked me to read over emails that he wanted to send to recruiters, "to advise if [they] look good". Since then, he has had a couple of contract jobs, one for a year and three months and another for a year and four months.

We are living in a time in which vast and diverse sections of the global population are increasingly struggling to find work that is stable and well-renumerated, and are struggling to find any work at all (Barchiessi, 2011; Li, 2017; Monteith, 2021; Johnson-Hanks, 2017). People all over the world invest their time, resources and hopes into education, migration and CV improvements in order to find the jobs that they believe offer the best route to securing a better future for themselves and their families – jobs that, in many parts of the world, simply don't exist (Monteith, 2021). Tania Li, professor of anthropology based in Canada, argues, in her 2016 lecture on the problems with development, that this situation is unlikely to turn around (Li, 2017: 1250). Even if countries reach the level of GDP growth that economists and other development experts claim will result in the growth of jobs, South Africa, India and Indonesia have demonstrated that periods of high growth can be jobless (Li, 2017: 1250; Bhorat *et al*., 2021). Especially, as is the case in South Africa, when economic growth is driven by sectors like finance that tend to produce massive profits for a few people while not generating very many jobs (Bhorat *et al*., 2021; Li, 2017). She argues that because of this, and other distressing trends in inequality and poverty, we should be outraged, "but mostly we are not" because we tell ourselves two stories: firstly, that there is widespread unemployment now but things will get better (the teleological narrative of imminent development) and, secondly, that there are experts and leaders intervening to make things better, and people should help themselves in the meantime (the logic of international development and technical solutions) (Li, 2017). These stories, like Ramaphosa's response to

Slindokuhle, counsel patience, suggesting that people will find jobs eventually and full employment will be reached – "that everyone's turn will eventually come" (Li, 2017). While I don't agree with Tania Li that "we" are not outraged enough, especially if the "we" includes the very young people who are most affected by this state of affairs (see Honwana, 2012, Iwilade & Ebiede, 2022 for example), I do agree that economies organised along neoliberal capitalist lines are unlikely to deliver on promises of full (stable, well-paid) employment and general universal wellbeing and security. However, even where there is resistance against the lack of jobs, the two narratives outlined above do powerful ideological and material work in upholding the neoliberal capitalist myths about eventual prosperity for all. Therefore, it is important to ask what comes next for those vast sections of the global population, like Thabo, for whom waged work is not guaranteed. It is also important to ask what's next for our societies and collective futures, as this has important implications for how we understand productive uses of time, forms of sociality, meanings of and methods for development and the purpose of (higher) education.

In this chapter, I set out how the preceding chapters have answered the research questions that I articulated in Chapter One. As I do this, I will reflect on some of the implications that I have mentioned above. In the first section, a summary of the research is followed by a discussion about the contributions that this research has made to key literatures (including graduate unemployment in South Africa, the geographies of youth, higher education, temporalities and relationalities) as well to methodologies and policy. I will then end by posing questions which can provide some direction for further research in this area.

7.2. Understanding educated unemployment in South Africa: summary of the findings and research contributions

The aim of this thesis was to answer the question: how do young, Black university graduates experience unemployment in contemporary South Africa? In Chapter Two, I outlined an approach to answering this question which, I have argued, offers a novel approach to understanding graduate unemployment in South Africa that is nuanced and compassionate. Employment and unemployment rates don't tell us anything meaningful about the contemporary realities of working and not working. Therefore, I have proposed the conceptual framework of "everyday unemployment" to understand the experiences of the

young people that I interviewed as part of this research. I began this chapter with an exploration of neoliberalism as both a material and discursive force, from below and above, that plays a significant role in exacerbating the unemployment crisis in South Africa, shaping how people experience and respond to unemployment, and partly determining the alternative options that are available/acceptable for young people struggling to find graduate jobs to pursue. I highlighted the fact that neoliberalism is never complete. The young people that I interviewed drew on a variety of discourses that they have encountered to both critique and internalise various aspects of neoliberalism in South Africa.

The fetishisation of waged work, in neoliberal societies, means that the lack of waged work is felt as an overwhelming, intense and persistent lack that seeps into the fabric of daily life: the lack of money, moving back home with parents and lacking any privacy and independence, boredom and isolation during working hours, and the fear and feeling of shame while walking in one's own neighbourhood. There is simply no time off and no escape from being unemployed. I argue that "everyday unemployment" best captures the experiences that form under these conditions. I trace the decades-old use of "the everyday" and "everyday life" as an analytical concept in geography in the works of de Certeau (1984) and Lefebvre (1991), whose work was influential in urban geographies. From this work, Hall (2019b) develops a feminist understanding of everyday life, in which she foregrounds relationality/relational geographies of space, to study experiences of lived austerity in the North of England. I show that while there are fewer research projects which use everyday life as an analytical concept in research related to lived experiences in Africa (with the edited volume on the everyday lives of children by Imoh *et al.*, 2022 being an exception), there is research that implicitly adopts the lens of the everyday in research about educated unemployed young men in Egypt and Ethiopia (Mains, 2011; Pettit, 2018, 2019). The everyday, while challenging to define precisely, can be understood as encompassing "affect and emotions, bodily experiences and practical knowledges, the role played by 'lived' time and space in the constitution of social experience" (Hall, 2019: 770). In this chapter, I make a contribution to theorisations of the everyday by adding temporality and digital space as core aspects of everyday life to Hall's focus on relationality. In particular, I discuss the importance of recognising the ways in which the gap between expectations of linear progression throughout the lifecourse and the reality of non-linear, often stagnant temporalities shape

experiences of unemployment, while processes of ordinary future-making play an important role in how young people cope with and navigate unemployment. I also discuss how integral digital technologies, and especially the use of social media, have become to the everyday lives of young people, and the importance of recognising the role of digital space in understanding educated, Black youth unemployment in South Africa. In bringing together the literature on relationality, temporalities and digital space, I make a contribution to new ways of thinking about young people's experiences of waithood in Africa.

In Chapter Three, I discuss how I went about collecting the data that is used to answer the research questions set out in the introduction. In detailing this process, I have argued that an effective approach to studying the everyday is using a combination of semi-structured interviews and studying social media as youth archives of the self. I conducted the interviews online, mostly via WhatsApp voice call. The use of questions that spanned multiple temporalities and covered broad categories of life (include family, education, friendships, aspirations and views on government interventions) allowed me to elicit responses that gave detailed insights into what mattered to the young people that I interviewed but also into all aspects of their lives – both the spectacular and the mundane. While some participants were eager to share their stories with me due to, I have argued, the anonymity of a voice call and the "passing stranger" effect, others were less expressive on the phone but shared much more over WhatsApp text message. This highlighted the importance of giving participants multiple options for engagement. Studying LinkedIn as a social media archive complemented the interview data very well, in that it was less susceptible to problems related to recall and reconstruction, and would be able to capture some of the mundanities that may not be remembered by participants.

There were three ethical issues that arose from doing this research. The first issue was related to confronting the uncomfortable emotions arising from recruiting participants on LinkedIn and navigating the site's affective dimensions. Reaching out to people on a platform from which they are hopefully awaiting good news about an interview or a job offer requires careful thought on the method of approach. The second issue had to do with the difficulty of checking in on participants that I was not able to see throughout the interview. I had to rely on clues such as changes in the tone and volume of voice, sniffling, and long pauses to ask

whether they were okay and needed a break or wanted to end the interview. And finally, I considered the issues related to the use of social media data that is arguably public but potentially still needs to be treated as private. Based on existing guidelines, I chose to anonymise and paraphrase participant data collected from sites like LinkedIn and Twitter. Through this chapter, I have made two main contributions. Firstly, I have made a methodological contribution to the study of the everyday by illustrating the ways in which interviews and social media data as archive can provide rich insights. And, secondly, I have made a policy contribution by highlighting the lack of psychosocial support faced by young people who are no longer part of an institution, be it university or a place of work. The (local) government should prioritise the introduction and promotion of accessible counselling services, as outlined in the National Youth Policy 2030 (DWYPD, 2019: 25).

An important part of reflecting on what's next, for both South Africa and the rest of the world, is asking the right questions and using the appropriate tools to investigate potential answers. The everyday, which brings together the material and the discursive, as well as the macro and the micro, sheds light on people's actions, hopes, anxieties and thoughts, which provide important clues for what's to come in work, education, and international development.

The aim of Chapter Four was to answer the following question: What role does higher education play in shaping experiences of unemployment? Over four sections, I argue that higher education plays a significant role in shaping what these young people experience as unemployed graduates. I begin by placing the role of higher education and young people in visions of the future economy of South Africa constructed and promoted by successive ANC governments. Like other countries, South Africa has focused its attention on anticipating change induced by the fourth industrial revolution and participation in the global knowledge economy as the primary means through which economic development will be achieved.

Although President Ramaphosa quotes the number of jobs that are projected to be produced by the fourth industrial revolution and the revenue that could be generated from being an active participant in the knowledge economy, the future remains uncertain. But the reform of the higher education sector is justified by these numbers anyway, which are more

speculative than they are guaranteed. Using four key policy and strategy documents, I show how education is positioned as critical to the achievement of a digital technology-enabled prosperous future. The government has identified three areas of the higher education sector that need to be addressed in order to provide the human and intellectual capital required to grow the economy: increased resources dedicated to STEM education, "renewal" of the academic profession, and interventions related to curriculum-alignment, industry-university collaborations and improved career guidance in STEM options. By studying the same policy documents in addition to speeches made by government officials at events for young people, I show that young people are similarly imagined as crucial to the achievement of economic growth. The government's message to young people, who they have constructed as fully agential, rational, outcome-maximising decision-makers, is that they should work hard, play their part in their own success and the success of their communities and country, make the right education and career decisions (i.e.: choose STEM) and to raise their aspirations.

What the next section of the chapter reveals is, first, a set of contradictions between government's expectations for the role of young people in national development and, secondly, a gap between how young people are imagined by the state and their actual experiences of higher education. By detailing what young people have to endure and overcome in order to enter higher education, I show that while, on the one hand, the government wants young people to make education fashionable, they continue to underfund the sector while making it increasingly difficult for students to access funding. While the government tells young people to work hard, they don't ensure that there are sufficient enrolment spaces for all of the young people who get the matric results that they need to access university education. I also discuss the ways in which young people make decisions about their education futures, highlighting the relational aspects, as well as the myriad other life goals that are considered alongside material concerns related to jobs and incomes. In the third section of this chapter, I consider the ways in which young people have (re)evaluated the purpose and value of higher education in the face of its failure to deliver on the promise for a prosperous future. I find that young people have had three main responses in relation to higher education: they value the other skills that they learned while in university (which differentiate them from unemployed people who did not get a university

education); they still believe that education is valuable, but only insofar as other conditions (like having "connections") are met; and they found the value of education in its potential to allow them to take up opportunities that would require a degree very quickly. Finally, I make the point that the failure of their very challenging investment to result in the returns that they expected plays a significant role in shaping how they feel about being unemployed.

In this chapter, I make contributions to the geographies of (higher) education and to the literature on access to higher education in South Africa. In geography, there have been calls for education research that centres the voices and experiences of the young people themselves, as well as calls for more research from the global South. I have responded to both of these here, by presenting an account of young people's education experiences from South Africa. But more specifically, I have added, to the predominantly quantitative research on higher education access, experiential evidence which complicates the access/no access binary by showing the complex, protracted and circuitous routes that even successful university graduates have to take in order to access education. From a policy perspective, this research has highlighted the need to urgently prioritise longstanding issues related to funding, the lack of information and the lack of sufficient enrolment spaces for young people who achieve a "bachelor's pass" in their matric exams. However, the main contribution that I make to the policy discussion is related to providing support to young people that is comprehensive. For example, broader concerns about violent crime and gender-based violence have to be linked to discussions about how to support young women to transition from school to university, especially when they have personal goals related to achieving independence and living in another part of the country or if they feel compelled to eliminate one or more options from an already limited set of choices for university based on concerns for safety. It is also important, in this regard, to ensure that young people get their stipends on time and have accommodation that is safe before the beginning of the academic year.

The higher education sector will continue to face pressure from government demands for the generation of a human capital force that is ready to work in the tech-enabled knowledge economy. It is likely that people, as in, academics and other higher education staff and students, will continue to resist this push for the core purpose of universities to become linked to the economy and labour markets. However, governments are not the only ones

engaged in processes of future-making. It will be interesting to see how young people engage with and imagine higher education in the context of the lack of government support for access and increasing unemployment (both in South Africa and elsewhere). The responses from this group of young people suggests that higher education may continue to be "fashionable", even though the value for obtaining a higher education may not lie in getting a graduate job.

In Chapter Five, I ask: How do young people cope with and navigate graduate unemployment? In answering this question, I take an approach that does not centre and focus exclusively on young people's material survival, and the ways in which they are able to get by through seeking various opportunities to hustle (Langevang & Gough, 2009; Di Nunzio, 2012). This can obscure the range of activities that young people engage in as they attempt to move their lives forward. Instead, I focus on the everyday to investigate two things: firstly, how, despite repeated disappointments, young people managed to hold onto a sense of the future, and, secondly, what kind of futures were being imagined by and mobilised by them. I argue that by paying attention to how the future features in their daily lives, we can better understand how they cope with and navigate unemployment in the present. In the first section of this chapter, I make a distinction between "work" and "labour" in order to frame young people's engagement with motivational content on social media and daily religious practice as labours of keeping several futures in grasp. In the section that follows, I discuss the particular futures that these young people were hoping for and working towards under three themes: work, entrepreneurship and migration. In doing so, I make several findings. The process of work had itself become a full-time job. Unlike the young educated unemployed men in other contexts (Mains, 2011; Jeffery, 2010; Masquelier, 2013) who waited for more suitable work, the young people in my study adjusted their search from looking for professional, graduate-level jobs in their respective fields to searching more broadly for any work that they could do. Many young people blamed themselves for the lack of progress in securing a job, saying that they suspect that their CVs were not of a high standard. Therefore, they paid (often with money they have had to ask for or borrow from their parents and other family members) so-called CV and job experts to help them fix this problem. The second theme explores the two ways in which young people talked about entrepreneurship: first, as an immediate solution to the problem of

unemployment that they were facing, and, second, as a long-term strategy for building generational wealth. Here, I have shown that, although government insists on young people creating their own jobs, they have not put the infrastructure and resources in place to support those who attempt to respond to this repeated call from the government. However, I have also shown that there are unique opportunities for hustling and entrepreneurship that arise for young women because of the growth in social media and the beauty/fashion industry over recent years. However, based on their experiences with (or observations of) precarious work, young people had goals of starting their own businesses. Not only did they believe that this would better shield them from the precarity of the labour market and the whims of cruel and detached employers, but also that it was important to have something that could be passed down to their (future) children. Finally, I discuss young people's attempts, desires and contemplations to move overseas in response to the failure to find work in South Africa. Social media has played a critical role in stirring up aspirations, among unemployed young South African graduates, to take up opportunities to teach English as a foreign language in East and Southeast Asia. I argue that these desires potentially signal a change in the geographies of aspirations, from the domination of the West as a destination for migration among white South Africans to the greater role that Asian countries play in possibilities for moving abroad among young, Black university graduates in South Africa.

This chapter makes important and timely contributions to the literature on ordinary future-making in Africa (i.e.: van Wolputte *et al*., 2022 and Jeffrey & Dyson, 2021) by illustrating the ways in which young people's everyday actions, thoughts, hopes and fears were oriented towards particular kinds of futures. In doing so, I have also made the following contributions that are relevant to youth policy: firstly, between leaving school and finding a job, young people lack career services support and, therefore, turn to job/CV entrepreneurs on social media for help. However, this is not to say that there aren't larger structural problems to be addressed as a matter of priority. Secondly, the findings have shown that even when youth are engaged in entrepreneurship, it tends to be in areas that have low barriers to entry and diminishing returns as more people offer the same service or product (like braiding hair, selling eyelash extensions). Therefore, it is essential to investigate opportunities for youth businesses in other, more sustainable areas of the economy.

Finally, Chapter Six asks the following question: In what ways do kinship and friendship shape graduate unemployment while simultaneously being shaped by it? Here, I have shown how the intertwining of everyday temporalities and relationality sheds light on the nuanced dynamics of young people's experiences in the context of unemployment. Through the lens of loafing or time-wasting, I've elucidated how these temporal experiences and practices influence the construction of kinship and sociality among educated unemployed youth in South Africa. By delving into Noxolo's narrative and situating it within broader discussions on time-wasting, I've depicted the complexities of loafing as both a coping mechanism and a challenge to conventional life trajectories. In the first section of this chapter, I explore the meaning of the term "*umahlalela*", and relate it to wider literatures on male youth wasting time in the global South. The struggles with passing abundant time are linked to ideas about appropriate and expected uses of time for young, educated people. In the second section of the chapter, I turn to consider the ways in which relationships with family and friends both shape and are shaped by the experience of unemployment. For most young people, family constituted the main source of material and financial support. However, young people complained that their lack of empathy and understanding caused tensions and left an emotional support gap in the lives of the unemployed graduates. While the roles played by family and friends often overlapped, friends were particularly important sources of emotional and moral support. However, friendships were also characterised as much by tension as they were by affection. Digital and social media spaces played an essential role in both providing the space for new friendships to form and for the maintenance of old friendships.

In contributing to the literature on everyday temporalities and relational geographies, this chapter advances three key insights. Firstly, it provides an empirical account of how young South African graduates negotiate time in their daily lives, enriching our understanding of temporal experiences in diverse contexts. Unlike the young men in India and Ethiopia whose loafing was very public, the young people in this research didn't want to advertise their loafing because they were ashamed. They also experienced a form of loafing that was very local and limited in physical geographical space. Secondly, it highlights the resilience of family networks in times of crisis, while also exposing the challenges that unemployment poses to familial bonds. Finally, by foregrounding friendships in geographical inquiry, this

chapter responds to calls for a more comprehensive exploration of social relationships, particularly in digital spaces. By elucidating the multifaceted nature of friendship dynamics and their role in sustaining social connections, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of contemporary sociality. However, I have also highlighted how isolating unemployment can be for young people, and the role that social media plays in providing opportunities to connect with others in contexts where those opportunities may be limited in “real life”. Through these discussions, this chapter contributes to the ongoing dialogue within geography and beyond, illuminating the intricate interplay between time, relationships, and social reproduction in the lives of young people.

7.3. What next?

The stories presented in this thesis provide some direction for further research in six areas. Firstly, the concept of "everyday unemployment" offers a nuanced lens through which to understand the lived experiences of unemployed youth. Further research could delve deeper into the emotional dimensions of prolonged unemployment, exploring how individuals cope with feelings of frustration, hopelessness, and self-blame. Understanding the emotional and affective dimensions of unemployment can both contribute to theories of emotion and affect using empirical evidence from the global South as well as inform targeted interventions to support mental wellbeing.

Secondly, the relationship between higher education and unemployment warrants further investigation. Research could study the efficacy of government initiatives aimed at promoting STEM education and fostering industry-university collaborations in ways that could shed light on pathways to meaningful employment. The chapter highlights young people's turn towards entrepreneurship as a response to unemployment. Future research could explore the challenges and opportunities faced by aspiring entrepreneurs, particularly in accessing resources and overcoming structural barriers. Longitudinal studies tracking the trajectories of entrepreneurial ventures could provide insights into the sustainability and impact of youth-led businesses.

The pervasive influence of social media on the everyday lives of young people presents a compelling area for research. Investigating how social media platforms shape perceptions of

success, influence career aspirations, and facilitate networking among unemployed youth could provide valuable insights into digital cultures and online communities. However, researchers must also consider the digital divide and ensure inclusivity in their methodologies. Exploring the role of family and peer networks in navigating unemployment can deepen our understanding of social support systems. Research could investigate the dynamics of familial relationships, the emotional toll of unemployment on interpersonal connections, and the role of digital communication channels in maintaining social ties. Longitudinal studies could capture changes in social networks over time and assess their impact on resilience and well-being. Finally, advancing research methodologies to capture the complexities of everyday life and unemployment is essential. Future studies could adopt longitudinal approaches to track individuals' experiences over time, incorporating participatory research methods to actively involve participants in the research process. Additionally, leveraging social media data as a research tool while ensuring ethical considerations and participant engagement could enhance the richness of qualitative inquiries.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Research Participants

Name	Age	Gender	University	Qualification
Anele	35	M	University of Fort Hare	BSocSc Industrial Relations and Psychology
Athi	27	W	Cape Peninsula University of Technology	NDip Biotechnology
Awande	21	W	University of Pretoria	BSocSc Political Science; PGCE
Ayanda	25	W	Rosebank College; UNISA	NDip Journalism; BA Communication Science
Felicia	24	W	University of Limpopo	BSc Chemistry and Biochemistry
Kamo	27	W	UNISA	BCom Business Management
Lerato	24	W	Tshwane University of Technology	NDip Analytical Chemistry
Lizwi	26	M	University of the Witwatersrand	BSc (Hons) Construction
Lufuno	25	W	Vaal University of Technology	BTech Chemical Engineering
Mable	24	W	University of Johannesburg	BA Communication and Languages
Madumelane	27	W	University of Johannesburg	NDip Building; BTech Quantity Surveying
Sipho	28	M	Cape Peninsula University of Technology; Tshwane University of Technology	NDip Chemical Engineering; BTech Chemical Engineering
Refilwe	24	M	University of Pretoria	BSocSc Political Science; PGCE
Marinkie	29	W	Tshwane University of Technology	BTech Chemical Engineering
Matete	27	W	University of Johannesburg	BA (Hons) Strategic Communications and Languages
Mpho	27	W	Vaal University of Technology	Master's in Chemistry
Mpolokeng	24	W	University of the Witwatersrand	BHSc (Hons) Biomedical Sciences
Neo	24	W	Vaal University of Technology	BTech Analytical Chemistry
Nhlanhla	30	M	University of the Witwatersrand	BSc (Hons) Mining Engineering
Njabulo	36	W	UNISA	BCom Marketing Management
Noko	27	W	University of the Witwatersrand	BSc (Hons) Urban and Regional Planning
Nomfundo	22	W	Durban University of Technology	NDip Electrical Engineering
Noxolo	28	W	University of Johannesburg	BSocSc Public Management
Nsindiso	25	W	Durban University of Technology	NDip Biotechnology
Palesa	25	W	AfDA	BA Live Performance
Remoneilwe	26	W	North-West University	BCom (Hons) Business Management; PGCE
Semakaleng	27	W	University of Pretoria	BEng Metallurgy
Siba	27	M	North-West University	BA (Hons) History

Sibahle	27	W	University of Johannesburg	NDip Industrial Engineering; Advanced Diploma in Quality Assurance
Sibonaliso	22	W	University of Cape Town	BSocSc Sociology, Gender and Politics & Governance
Sinovuyo	-	W	University of Cape Town	BSocSc (Hons) Sociology and Social Development
Siphokazi	-	W	Rhodes University	BEcon (Hons) Economics
Sne	-	W	University of Fort Hare	LLB
Thabo	25	M	Tshwane University of Technology	NDip Mechatronics Engineering
Tumelo	26	M	University of Johannesburg	BTech Mechanical Engineering
Vhonani	27	M	University of Venda	NDip Administration
Zama	23	W	University of Johannesburg	BCom Finance

Appendix 2: Educated Mahlalela

> "Today's poem was inspired by what I've seen on social medias, what I've seen on pages like LinkedIn, Twitter – what people have been posting about being unemployed yet these people are actually graduates from varsity. And this morning I was actually applying for a job as well and then I realised that ever since I graduated, the only thing that I did was internship. And ever since after internship, I never got any lucky of being employed within the field that I studied for. I then realised that we are actually educated mahlalelas. There are a lot of people out there that have degrees yet they are sitting at home. Or they are employed in other fields that they didn't study for. So what does 'education is the key to success' really mean for us as youth. Maybe it's time we really change how we view the whole saying… I just realised that maybe we got it all wrong. Maybe the keys that we are holding are not actually the keys to open our doors for success." (Noko, 27, female, Wits Regional Planning graduate)

Educated Mahlalela
Born and raised with the saying 'education is the key to success'
But it's not as easy as it sounds
We were raised to think that nothing is better than completing conventional education
That is, getting your matric certificate, going to varsity, then [unclear]
That is the route that we were taught to follow in order to be comfortable and never worry about stability
However, I am here today, with not just one but two degrees in my bag
Oh my bag is actually in my closet
I never had a chance to actually use it
I am educated Mahlalela
I have the keys but I'm not really sure if they open doors of success
Which does am I supposed to open with the keys that I'm holding if the doors are not even available at all
How am I supposed to win all the battles if my weapons were not sharpened enough to fight against corruption, nepotism, or some sort of sexual harassment?
Those are the nightmares we have to deal with, right?
I find myself in the same bucket as those who didn't focus on 'education is the key to success' but knew that privilege got their backs
They are not educated and definitely not Mahlalela
On the other hand I have to deal with the tons of experience that is required in order to be eligible to be employed
Where is this experience even sold?
How much does it cost?
Oh never mind
Because I can't even calculate it in my mind
I'm pretty sure I can't even afford it
I'm educated Mahlalela
Education is the key to success
Yes, perhaps we cannot discredit that
However, was the wise man really referring to conventional education as we perceive it to be?
If that's that case, then why am I sitting home with my degrees and still no sign of success?
Where did we go wrong?
Now that I think about it
We were actually socialised and boxed into this whole thing called success
Educated Mahlalela

Appendix 3: Interview Questions

Interview Questions Guide – Graduates

1. Biographical information
    a. Name
    b. Age
    c. Gender
    d. Where do you live?
    e. Highest level of education and course studied
2. Background information
    a. Tell me about yourself
    b. Where did you grow up? Where did you go to (primary and high) school?
    b. Why did you choose to study this particular course at this particular university? What did you expect to gain from pursuing these studies? What were the career options you considered?
    c. Who do you live with (parents, grandparents, aunt, uncle)? What do they do? Did they go to university?
    d. Do you have any responsibilities in your family?
3. Un(employment):
    a. What do you do every day? Do you have any sources of income?
    b. Are you actively seeking a job? What kind of jobs are you looking for? Which jobs have you applied for? How do you go about looking for a job?
    c. Have you had any jobs (or internships) in the past? What did you do? Why do you no longer work in those jobs?
    d. How do your current circumstances (of under-/unemployment) make you feel? How do you cope with negative feelings?
    e. Is there any shame associated with long-term unemployment?
4. Support:
    a. How are you supported by family and friends? In what ways do they contribute to your search for employment?
    b. How do you manage the expectations of your family, friends and community as a university-educated person who is currently unemployed? Are there things that your family expects from you as a graduate?
    c. Do you feel supported by any government mechanisms? Are there any non-governmental organisations that have supported you?
5. The future:
    a. Where do you see yourself in the 5 – 10 years?
    b. Do you have any short- or long-term plans for yourself? And for your career?
    c. How do you feel about the future?