



## INTRODUCTION

Whilst society as a whole navigates the challenges that have come with the COVID-19 pandemic, the youth have endured specific hardships that are often suffered in silence, behind closed doors or are discounted as laziness or entitlement.

This youth month Trade Intelligence handed the stage over to the younger generation to explore youth perspectives amidst the pandemic, giving them a platform to be heard.

This opinion article is researched and written by our own intern, fresh out of school, eager to learn and make a difference, and most importantly representative of the nation's youth at this time.

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Managing Director of Trade Intelligence

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## *Youth perspectives at the time of COVID-19*

by Luke Smith, Trade Intelligence Intern

As the youth, whether employed, unemployed, studying or trying to run a business, we all know the state in which the economy is in and are aware of the immense impact it has on our future and our current situation. COVID-19 contributes immensely to our fears, changing society and life as we know it, limiting our opportunities and making everyday activities so much more challenging. Living in a time of a global pandemic is stressful for all, but as a young person it is particularly daunting and amplifies our fears, creating a lot of uncertainty and dashing our expectations.

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In this article we take a closer look at the causes, consequences and impact of youth unemployment, youth entrepreneurship and the challenges faced in starting and growing these businesses, the adoption of technology and how this places youth at an advantage, and finally, the future of learning looking at online learning as a primary platform. The data in this report was gathered through desktop research, interviews with young entrepreneurs, a youth survey conducted online and the analyst's contribution.

Our hope is that through this opinion piece, South Africa's youth can be seen and heard, in order to be given fair opportunities and supported as we strive to contribute to our economy and our nation's future.

## 1. Youth Unemployment

The coronavirus (COVID-19) has made it difficult to continue with 'business as usual', with many companies shutting down and the remainder hanging on for survival – that's for the lucky few employees who already have jobs.

For the rest, the job search is at a standstill and this impacts the youth even more since they make up the majority of South Africa's jobseekers (32% unemployment for 15-24 year olds in South Africa, and 40.1% for 15-34 year olds), with COVID-19 adding to the burden already on their shoulders.

## 2. Youth Entrepreneurship

With unemployment at a peak, many young people have turned to starting their own businesses, but this too has its challenges. We look at the importance and objectives of youth entrepreneurship during COVID-19, challenges faced, how society values entrepreneurship, assess entrepreneurial skills and knowledge relating to sources of assistance for entrepreneurs.

The focus on development in youth entrepreneurship has increased, given the potential for entrepreneurial opportunities.

## 3. Adoption of Technology

This is the age of technology and we are immersed in it, but with the dawn of COVID-19 an even brighter spotlight has been placed on just how critical a role technology plays. Who better to lead the way in technology adoption during this crisis than the youth who have known nothing else?

Here we share views on the role that technology plays during the pandemic, how young people can innovate with their tech-savvy skills to help us overcome the challenges we face during COVID-19, helping to spread awareness and track the disease.

## 4. Online Learning

The government called for all educational institutes to close during lockdown, leaving students to turn to online learning. We look at the important role of online learning during this pandemic and what some of the challenges, opportunities and the overall experiences of online learning are.

# 1. YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Youth unemployment is a sensitive topic amongst the young people of South Africa and the statistics reflecting the unemployment rate (which increases monthly) are terrifying. Prior to lockdown, nearly 40% of South Africa's young people aged 15 to 34 were not employed (compared to a national average of around 30%) according to the latest figures released by Statistics SA in the Quarterly Labour Force Survey on 12 February 2020.

Then enter COVID-19 – a socio-economic crisis that we will take years to recover from, over and above an economy that was already severely under pressure before it struck. The repercussions on employment will be significant and widespread, especially on the youth attempting to embark on their careers at a time of massive uncertainty.

Being unemployed as a young person is undoubtedly the scariest phase in your life, as your future is uncertain and you experience a rollercoaster of emotions – not only is your employment status affected and your future at risk, but so too is your mental health. Unemployment is soul crushing to many of us as the youth, as we feel like we're just another number in the unemployment statistics.

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Being employed is seen as a privilege amongst our peers. The idea of 'employment' has drastically and sadly shifted – it's no longer about the title "what you do for a living" or about "building a dream future" or even about "earning an enviable pay check" but rather about the fact that you are simply employed and getting any form of income to pay for necessities to survive and feed our families.

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privilege amongst our peers.

My generation, the Millennials, are constantly frowned upon by older generations – referred to as "lazy and unenthusiastic" – although all we ever asked for was a chance, a job, knowledge to be passed down to us, a skill to be taught to us and our ideas to be heard and invested in. We have even taken to the streets in dire hopes for our cries to be heard.

We as the youth make an appeal to society and the older generations, government and investors to hear our cries for help. We're not asking for handouts but rather knowledge and skills to be passed down to us. We want the chance to contribute to society and to the recovery of our economy. We want to have peace of mind, and take the security of our future into our own hands.

## 2. YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP

South African youth are known to be trendsetters in society, the most technologically advanced and creative geniuses.

We've definitely opened up a lot of doors for ourselves when it comes to being influencers and tech drivers, but is this enough? Are we just settling for creating and setting trends and being tech savvy with all our creative and innovative ideas or can we actually make a living and create opportunities out of this?

With the current alarmingly high levels of unemployment, one would think South Africa would have a myriad of budding local young entrepreneurs, but this is unfortunately not the case. COVID-19 has definitely been a setback for us – but the challenges present an opportunity to create South African solutions, and young people can play a role in creating these solutions. So what is the silver lining in this seemingly dark cloud? Is it the path to entrepreneurship?

This poses the question: *“What skills can the youth be taught to increase our appetite for entrepreneurship and our chances of success?”*

Imagine a future filled with young entrepreneurs, not waiting on a job but creating one; earning our own living, creating our own opportunities, initiating change and perhaps creating further employment opportunities for more youth and generations to come.

What can be done to encourage youth entrepreneurship?

- Earlier career guidance that highlights the importance of entrepreneurship and doesn't always advocate tertiary education as being paramount. Of course we need doctors or lawyers, but not everyone has access to that type of further education. This attitude makes us feel that unless we make the effort to start a small business, we will always be belittled and seen as less important or glamorous.
- *“For entrepreneurship to become a viable career path for young people on a large scale, we need to foster the culture of entrepreneurship in the educational system of South Africa, making it a formal part of our national curriculum.”* (J. Lang, City Press, 2020) Government and corporate South Africa need to work together to create an entrepreneurial landscape that allows our youth to flourish, by assisting them with knowledge, experience and business skills and acumen.
- Start-up funding is scarce and both the private and public sector have not shown intent in growing young entrepreneurs by taking a leap of faith to make funding opportunities more available. The organisations coming forward to open up the economy in this regard are few and far between, and aspiring entrepreneurs are left to jump through hoops of fire to get funding approval. Or perhaps the youth only feel this way because we aren't equipped to get through those hoops with any confidence, so support structures need to be visibly available.

### 3. YOUTH ADOPTION OF TECHNOLOGY

As a young person, technology has impacted me positively and has been very beneficial by giving me access to information, the ability to connect and facilitating convenience. Technology has played a significant role in all our lives, but the youth especially are considered tech savvy and often referred to as the digitally-driven generation because our rate of adoption of technology is that much higher than any other generation.

The youth should be the pioneers of using technology to change the world for the better!  
Technology just comes naturally to us, we can't imagine life without it!

The birth of technology, its benefits and the rapid growth across various fields globally has made it a part of everyday life. As a result, technology has admittedly had its share of positive and negative impacts in society depending on the intent of the user and usage behaviours displayed – on the one hand it's been used to enable and accelerate solutions for societal and medical ills, while on the other hand, it has played a role in the rise of fraud and corruption.

There's no ignoring the role of technology in the time of COVID-19. In the absence of technology many activities including work, school and in our personal lives would have come to a complete standstill, highlighting its benefits and elevating its importance during this challenging time, but also for the future. Technology has undoubtedly made social distancing bearable, keeping us connected to family and friends who live far away. It has allowed those of us with jobs to continue working remotely and put food on the table, and made it possible to spread awareness of this virus and raise funds where needed through technology by being able to not only retrieve and send out information about this virus but also helping us reach out to organisations and donate to COVID-19 relief funds such as The Solidarity Response Fund, Afrika Awake, Coronacare For South Africa etc.

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Leading up to this report, I did a lot of reading to immerse myself in the world of the youth and how technology adoption has evolved specifically amidst the COVID-19 crisis – below are extracts from a particular article that really struck me:

*"[...] young people have found new ways to survive and transform their lives and communities. In many cases, they have done so by harnessing the power of digital technologies. These innovations have both helped them respond to the current crisis and could shape the future for the better with the right support."*

*"Accurate information is essential to help counter the risks of COVID-19 and, in many places, the youth have proven crucial in this."*

*"In South Africa, young people have mobilised through choirs to send prevention messages. In Liberia, youth started a prevention campaign and are sewing masks from African wax prints. Rural Uganda has seen young members of village health teams sharing vital health information through radio, TV and social media. And in Ghana, young health workers and volunteers are visiting high risk areas to spread health messages and, where possible, test residents."*

*"It is essential to ensure young people are provided with new technologies that can help them build on existing networks and disseminate knowledge about issues such as public health."*

*"Technology and digital platforms can also enhance other forms of young people's mobilisations. They can allow youth-led networks, associations, religious groups and cooperatives to strengthen individual actions and act as catalysts for new forms of civic participation."*

*"Young people will be central to both tackling the coronavirus crisis now and rebuilding economies after the pandemic subsides. Technologies and digital platforms have the potential to help in the process, such as by reducing costs and facilitating access to new opportunities. For this to reach its full potential, however, investments will be necessary in areas such as infrastructure, digital skills, online security and social protection for gig workers."*

*"As the importance of young people's initiative and technology are highlighted during the COVID-19 crisis, this is the perfect moment of governments and international partners to prioritise the digitalisation of the economy, education and financial sectors."*

Source: <https://africanarguments.org/2020/05/27/activists-not-leaders-how-the-youth-have-used-tech-under-covid-19/>

My question now is – with the obvious advantages that the youth have in technology adoption, are we, the South African youth, using it to make any difference and bring value to society?

## 4. YOUTH ONLINE LEARNING

As the global pandemic hit South Africa, our government, like many others, initiated a nationwide lockdown which brought the education system to a complete stop for weeks. Everything we knew about schooling and studies changed overnight as we were forced to shift our learning platform from face-to-face to online learning, and uncertainty looms about if or when tertiary educational institutions will be able to open up to our country's learners once again.

Lockdown has thus resulted in the youth having to turn to online learning as the global pandemic has caused thousands of educational institutes to shut their doors and their students to stay at home and do their classes virtually or online. With this sudden shift away from the classroom, many are wondering whether the adoption of online learning will continue post-pandemic and how such a shift would impact the education system.

Online learning has had both successes and challenges in South Africa. For some, online learning has made it easier for them to focus on tasks and be able to manage their time better, be able to communicate more effectively, it has allowed more time to improve on specific skills, and has given more learning opportunities. However, for others, it has opened a gateway for challenges such as distractions, lack of time management, lack of self-discipline and focus, network problems, unorganised workload etc.

Many tertiary institutions have encouraged and adapted to online learning using virtual classrooms and digital collaboration platforms in order to get through the syllabus. Not all tertiary institutions are able to provide online learning due to financial situations, however, thus leaving many students resorting to learning from the textbook on their own, making it that much more difficult to graduate.

So whilst online learning has proved effective and beneficial thus far (allowing us to continue with our studies, while also playing a big role in social distancing), the sustainability of this learning method is questionable as many learners have only limited access to technology or connectivity, creating an unlevel playing field. The poor remain at a disadvantage, whilst the rich can further their studies, and the youth are reliant on their circumstances either way.

The youth feel strongly that government should carefully consider recommendations for equal access to be given to the youth in order for us to continue with our studies and to take into account what consequences would arise if online learning is not invested in sufficiently.

In conclusion, there's no arguing that the youth is the future of South Africa, but the challenges we face are often over-looked. The youth has the power and the determination to help South Africa out of this global pandemic, and to ultimately change the world. Believe in us, encourage us, invest in us – we won't disappoint.

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## ABOUT TRADE INTELLIGENCE

Trade Intelligence ([www.tradeintelligence.co.za](http://www.tradeintelligence.co.za)) is South Africa's leading source of consumer goods retail business research, insight and capability building solutions. The business works with key stakeholders across the consumer goods sector to deliver on its goal to promote effective, profitable trading relationships, and to upskill and inspire best talent across the consumer goods industry.

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