

Me, me, me!

They don't know the name of Nelson Mandela's favourite dog ('If you can't google it, then it doesn't exist, LOL'). They can't spell ('That is so wack; it's for BBTs – born before technology'). They think Boom Boom Mancini is a Boom Shaka wannabe ('He must consider a new moniker if he wants to sell albums that we can readily recognise'). They frown uncomprehendingly when you tell them about Pandelani Nefolovhodwe's contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle ('With a name like that, it's no surprise he is a spent force,' they snigger).

By the time they are ten, their collection of personal portraits would put to shame any king or queen from seventeenth-century Europe, who at most had maybe four portraits and three sculptures in their palaces. The same monarch would squirm with envy to learn that these people also have gazillions of 'followers' on something called the internet.

Meet my children and their friends: AKA the Me Me Me Generation; AKA the Lazy Ones; AKA the Fidgety Fingers on the Fone Ones (which is only for texting and surfing the net. Return calls? That's so b4 Obama). When you speak to them – if you can corner them in their undies or pyjamas before they venture out of the house – they will only half-listen to you as they play with their ubiquitous devices, checking out who is 'liking' their status or retweeting their tweets. They are so nervous about being left behind that they constantly have to know what's 'trending' – especially if their names are tagged in the conversation.

Ah, these creatures are narcissistic.

However, before we start arguing about who exactly I am talking about here, let's establish the broader definitions of the generations that have preceded this lot – the group that some in South Africa have called the Born Frees. Personally, I don't like this term because it is politically loaded. It is also quite limited, based on the assumption that the world revolves around the problems this country experienced before 1994. Instead, I would like to broaden the net so as to position these people within a larger global context, in a period both before and after 1994. To augment my argument and draw my comparisons, it is inevitable that I will use sociological terminology that originated in the United States, since their academia has done so much research into social trends. Nevertheless, I will try to place these definitions within a local context as well.

We will start with the Lost Generation. These were the people born between 1883 and 1900 who were so named because they grew up in crushing poverty before being hit hard later by the Great Depression of the late 1920s and 1930s. In South Africa, these would have been people affected by the last Anglo-Zulu War, the Second Anglo-Boer War and World War I, as well as the Great Depression.

The baby boomers were born in the suburbs between 1943 and 1960. In America, they became yuppies who lost fortunes in the stock-market crash of 1987. Generation X – the term immortalised in Douglas Coupland's eponymous novel, published in 1991 – followed the baby boomers. Born between 1961 and 1980, they were the restless generation, never satisfied with their lot in life.¹

While these definitions come from the US, they can apply to some extent to other developed countries, as well as developing countries such as South Africa, where they mostly pertain to white people. (Within a local context, studies such as these hardly ever scratch the surface of black lives.) There were certainly Generation

Xers who were prevalent in the white community in South Africa – youngsters who began to question things; who refused to be enlisted in the army; who wanted to know why black people were treated as they were back then. In the black community, the likes of Tsietsi Mashinini, who shot to prominence during the June 16 uprising, would be a perfect representative of this generation, too: selfless and committed to the common good of the community.

And then the millennials, the generation I have chosen to talk about, came along and changed it all. Born between 1980 and 2000 (hence the reference to the millennium), these youngsters are truly a global phenomenon. Members of this generation, be they in China, the US, Nigeria or South Africa, tend to have the same worldview as many of their peers in other parts of the world. Technology, of course, is the factor unifying them, the thing that sets them apart from previous generations. They obtain their values from the lessons spewed on MTV, Twitter, Facebook, Myspace and all the other platforms mushrooming all over the place. They rap, they swag.

Their home language could be Igbo, Mandarin, Twi, Zulu, Amharic; but the language that is common to all of them is Me Me Me – the holy trinity of Me, Myself and I. These are the people who will tweet while sitting on a toilet moaning about their irregular bowel movements. They will Facebook a picture of the lunch they are having. Born in the shadow of reality TV, they are themselves stars in their own reality shows. They derive satisfaction from being celebrities – even though they are only celebrated by themselves and their egos, or by their circle of ‘friends’.

And yet the reality in which they ‘interact’ with this endless stream of ‘friends’ is a false one. How many times have you seen three or four of these creatures walk into an eating establishment, sit down to a meal and get down to thumbing their phones? Thirty, forty minutes later, when they have finished eating, they have not

uttered a single word to each other! Having a meal with friends used to be about sharing an experience, commenting on the food or the décor of the restaurant.

Then there is reading, which is another concept unfamiliar to them. While millennials certainly seem to have figured out the letters of the alphabet, as proven in their frequent use of OMG, WTF, BTW, you can't really call that reading or writing. If you really want to drive them berserk, lock them inside a library stocked with a wealth of books and newspaper clippings, give them a computer minus the internet, and ask them to write a properly referenced two-thousand-word essay about 'The Meaning of Obama' or, better still, 'What Lady Gaga Means to Me', or 'Why I Relate Better to Lindiwe Mazibuko than Julius Malema'.

With such a wealth of information at their fingertips, however, many millennials probably feel that having to do such research is completely unnecessary. I quote from the *Time* magazine article which inspired me to write about this phenomenon in the first place: 'The Industrial Revolution made individuals far more powerful – they could move to a city, start a business, read and form organisations. The information revolution has further empowered individuals by handing them the technology to compete against the huge organisations: hackers vs corporations; bloggers vs newspapers.'²

Yep, the millennials don't need us, and that's why we are scared of them. There, I said it. But before you whoop with joy, you tjarag narcissist, let me tell you what I've just done: I have quoted something that I read and attributed it accordingly. The technology generation has neither the patience nor the humility to acknowledge sources. I've lost count of the occasions when these creatures have stolen my words and put them on their Facebook pages, or even used them in their academic essays without acknowledging that one Fred Khumalo sweated bullets in order to come up with those shimmering nuggets of prose.

This is also not to say that I don't take advantage of the tools that have made this generation what they are. I tweet, I Facebook, I podcast, I YouTube, I blog and I utilise all the other things in between, because I am in the communication business. Technology is a means to an end. But to some of these millennial creatures, the mantra is: 'I tweet (or Facebook), therefore I am.' Technology becomes an end in itself.

For the record, I wrote this piece in one sitting without touching my phone or flipping the screen to my Facebook page. While doing so, what did I miss, what did I miss? Where the party at, my niggas? Is Rihanna back with Chris Brown? Has Khanyi Mbau added another layer of flesh to her lips? Has Malema unfriended me?

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