Wots ur ASLR? Adolescent girls' use of cellphones in Cape Town
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Introduction

The portable, mobile or cellphone (as it is called locally) has established itself technically, commercially, and socially in South Africa. Less than a decade ago, cellphone ownership in South Africa was for a privileged few, but today it represents an essential tool or 'fashion accessory' of adolescence. Wireless networks are the fastest growing communications technology in history, with a concurrent rise of a mobile youth culture based on peer-to-peer networks, with its own values and language of texting. Castells (2007) defines youth culture as the "specific system of values and beliefs that inform behaviour in a given age group so that it shows distinctive features vis-a-vis other age groups in society. As such, "there is a youth culture that finds in mobile communication an adequate form of expression and reinforcement" (Castells, 2007).

Globally, the mobile phone has had a profound influence on the patterns of young people's social networks and their relationships with each other. And as with the introduction of any new technology, moral panics and public anxiety emerged about the potential negative effects of cellphones on children (Buckingham, 1993; Livingstone, 2002). More specifically, fears about the disappearance of childhood as new technologies give children access to information and participation options that either blur the boundaries between childhood and adulthood or weaken their ties with the family and other social institutions. Here children are not seen as autonomous agents, but as being vulnerable to the negative effects of the new medium and incapable of self-regulation (Lemish & Cohen 2005).

However, some optimistic views acknowledge the potential of cellphones to enhance the lives of children especially in areas of education, and possibly even civic participation. Yet others stress the liberatory effects of mobile media as they enable youth to escape the demands of existing social structures and parental surveillance (Ling & Pederson, 2005). The present study explores girls' use of cellphones in Cape Town, South Africa, with a particular focus on their use of the popular cellphone based instant messaging software, MXit, and situated within the frameworks outlined above.

Background

Existing research on mobile youth culture and the use of cellphones by youth is concentrated in Europe, Asia and North America, where wireless technologies diffused rapidly among youth, before the mobile explosion reached Africa in the mid-1990s. Moreover, many studies explored the practices of sending instant text messages, with little research on the phenomenon of cellphones instant messaging, which does not appear as widespread elsewhere as it is in South Africa. The specific nature and distribution of mobile phone use among young people in Africa are largely undocumented, although one survey shows, not surprisingly, that the use of mobile phones tends to be higher among young adults (Castells, 2007). While a growing body of international literature explores the social consequences of mobile telephony, there is little that focuses on the South African context, with even less on South African youth.

Statement of purpose

This study explores adolescent girls' use of MXit, a cellphone based instant messaging service, in Cape Town, South Africa. As Tufte (2006) points out, there are often differences between how boys and girls use the media they have access to. She

further argues that girls talk on cellphones more than boys, and that the former use cellphones to maintain a kind of intimacy in their social relations. Mobile telephony is rapidly becoming a feature of our culture, yet we do not understand its effects on communicative practice and behaviour (Palen, 2000). This paper serves as exploratory research in this area, to highlight key themes for further exploration, and will also play a significant role towards contributing to the literature on this subject, and to widening understanding about youth and telephony in an African context. The following research questions guided the exploration:

- How are teenage girls using cellphones? Do cellphones play a role in the development of their social relations?

- What role do cellphones play with respect to girls' identity formation?

- How/ why do girls use MXit?

- Do girls perform their identities via MXit in ways that reinforce gendered communities of practice? (borrowing from Paechter, 2004)

Methodology

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of five teenage (16 and 17 yr old) girls attending a range of single-sex and co-ed high schools in the city. The interviews served to highlight main discussion points for focus groups. Interviews were conducted and recorded in the girls' bedrooms, and were then transcribed, with the transcripts analysed for themes.

A few weeks later, four focus groups were conducted with a further convenience sample at two high schools in Cape Town. Two focus groups were conducted with 8-10 participants, at a home of one of the participants; while the other two were held in the classroom, with the teacher present, during the period assigned to Life Orientation (Social Studies). Despite the larger number of participants present

in the second group, as well as the presence of the teacher, responses for both groups were similar. While the sample size is quite small, findings are supportive of trends identified in current international literature on the subject of youth use of mobile telephony, and given the dearth of research on this subject in South Africa, the present study provides strong indicative data that could lead to a broader research project in its identification of themes for further study.

Other methods have been used to explore youth cellphone use. For example, Chemaly & Haf (2007) used bulletin boards for teens to chat anonymously about cellphone use, and argue that this allowed more honest, thoughtful and in-depth answers than researchers might get in face-to-face interviews. However, the present study did not follow this route, as the researcher did not want to exclude participants without broadband Internet access at home, particularly as Internet penetration in South Africa is still quite limited[1].

In an attempt to narrow the gap between researcher and researched, two-way conversations that included the interviewee asking questions too, or asking them what questions should follow, yielded more interesting results. Despite this relaxed atmosphere, most interviewees did not criticize their own behaviour. Similar to the study conducted by Lemish and Cohen (2005), they did not admit that they themselves are guilty of behaviours, which they identified as negative. These kinds of behaviours included a real-time meeting up with a boy after meeting on MXit, taking suggestive or nude photographs or engaging in phone sex. The assumption was that a high degree of homogeneity between the researcher and the subjects in terms of gender, together with the privacy afforded by a one-on-one interview encounter, would result in more forthcoming responses. However, the frequency with which

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[1] Only 11.6% of the population have access to the Internet.
http://www.internetworldstats.com/stats1.htm

respondents allocated negative behaviours to others and not themselves, may indicate that this was not necessarily the case. This is a common human tendency, as people tend toward socially desirable responses by criticizing such behaviours, but associating them with 'others', much like the Third Person Effect hypothesis (Davison, 1983), where people believe that the media's effects "will not be on 'me' or 'you', but on 'them' – the third persons" (p.3). Like may other studies (Lemish & Cohen, 2005; Perloff, 2002), there seemed to be a perceptual gap between the beliefs that interviewees hold about the role the cellphone or MXit have on their own behavioural patterns as compared with that of others. For example, in answer to the question "have you ever met anyone in real life that you first met on MXIT?", one girl (like many of the others) answered:

> No, but lots of people do. They like get invites and stuff then they send photos to see what you look like and if they think this person is worthwhile meeting then they like meet at Cavendish [a local mall] or whatever (interview, 22/09 2007).

What is MXit? A brief summary

MXit is a South African based instant messaging application that runs on GPRS/3G cellphones with java support (though PC versions are available), and which allows real time chatting in one-on-one conversations or in a chat room, at a significantly cheaper rate than SMS messaging (1 or 2 cents versus around 80 cents). The messages are sent and received via the mobile Internet, and once users have downloaded the application to their cellphones (free of charge), they can also exchange messages with other cellphone users or computer users via MSN messenger, ICQ and Jabber. Other than low-cost messaging, MXit also offers users other services and products, such as news and games. There are no monthly fees and the maximum length of chat messages are 2048 characters compared to normal SMS at 160 characters. MXit estimates that as of October 2007, they had about 3 million

users, about 5 million log-ons per day and over 100 million messages sent per day, with about 10,000 new users per day. There are several types of chatrooms available on MXit, which include 'Flirt Chatzones 'Teen Chatzones', 'Topical Chatzones' and 'Grown-up Chatrooms'. Before you can send a message inside a chat room you must purchase some of MXit's own virtual currency, Moola (1 Moola is equal to one South African cent),

During 2006 and 2007, there was a storm of negative media publicity in South Africa around MXit, particularly highlighting cases of sexual predators attracting teenage girls via MXit chatrooms. As a result, there is even a Parents' Guide to MXit, available on the Internet (by Ramon Thomas, 2006). Consequently, MXit has been criticized for its potential addiction, abuse (cyber-bullying), its exploitation by sexual predators and unregulated chat rooms,, making the present study on girls' use of the application even more pertinent.

Discussion

Three main themes emerged during the course of the research: 1) the use of MXit in the development of personal relationships via social networking, 2) the use of MXit and the cellphone in the construction of personal identity, and 3) the potential use of MXit for education. Further sub-themes included the use of MXit for peer support, the 'softening' of time and the flexibility of social networking, the cellphone as an object or valued commodity, gender performativity, the use of photographs and video, race and identity, and the use of the cellphone in the classroom. These will each be discussed in turn, below.

MXit and the development of personal relationships

Social networking/ peer support

It seemed as though most of the girls were using their cellphones for social networking, to meet new friends and also for peer support, to receive or give advice to others. All the girls interviewed highlighted MXit's ability to increase their social connections, and one respondent even managed to cement a real world connection through her cellphone.

> Ok the only thing is that it connects you, like you actually get to know people. Like I have a friend at school and we actually got to know each other via MXit instead of personally and it's actually cool, we like each other a lot. And sometimes when you try to answer somebody, lots of people have this problem – now you're speaking and you have an argument for instance in real life – but in MXit you think so fast and you type and come up with all these clever remarks (interview, 11/10 2007).

With a perception of the world being an increasingly more dangerous place, perhaps as a result of a kind of 'cultivation' effect, most of the girls interviewed used the cellphone to interact with their peers because they did not always have the opportunity for face-to-face interaction. Instead of going to parties or being allowed to go out at night, they chatted on MXit in the privacy of their rooms. These social networks were often very large, with several respondents claiming to have over 200 MXit friends, and with most contacts unknown to them in the 'real world'. As one girl explained:

> OK, I've got three groups, I call them the schoolies – all the people from my school, then you get friends from outside school, old friends from primary school. Then you get the "come alongs", that's my other word for people that you don't know but your friends know. You get invites, like I've got a friend Bonita, and her dance partner, his name's Jason and she said he's really cool, would I like to talk to him. So I said ok and so now I chat with him and he is really cool but I don't really know him (interview, 10/10, 2007).

Another major use of MXit seemed to be giving and receiving advice, particularly in the area of relationships with the opposite sex. Through the interaction with others, interviewers included, people telling stories about themselves are engaged in actively constructing their identity in a particular context and performing

it in orientation to a particular listener. This quality – referred to by Bakhtin as "addressivity" (1981:288) – emphasizes the dialogical nature of the narration (Lemish & Cohen 2005). This is seen clearly on MXit, as demonstrated by the interview excerpt below:

> Sometimes if you're really sad and you feel lonely then you look at your phone and you think yah, I want to be with people who care. Especially when your parents criticise you. And then you pour out all your problems. People like doing that on MXit, they pour out all their problems. And lots of people are willing to give advice, especially like around relationships (interview, 11/10/072007).

In general, while girls seemed to spend many hours chatting on MXit, it was unclear exactly what the nature of conversations was, with all respondents categorizing their chat into either this kind of advice asking/ giving, or gossip/ small talk, as indicated by one respondent:

> Q: What do you talk about on MXit?
> A: Oh yes, gossip. We gossip a lot. Then there's celebrity gossip, and you talk about your favourite stars. And you talk about food when you're hungry. And then you start a whole conversation about food, teachers you don't like. And then also relationships, if you're in a relationship you talk about that and you share. OK but sometimes the majority of it is boring it's like hi, hi, how are you, fine, what are you doing, nothing much (interview, 10/09 2007).

As Johnsen (2003) explained, this kind of communication has a very important function apart from the instrumental exchange of information, as it becomes an information carrier "without having content or function except to sustain the idea of a social fellowship" (p.163). There is existing research on this practice of digital 'gift-giving', which is found to be common among youth and is often compared to older practices of passing notes (Johnsen 2003; Ling and Yttri 2002).

Relationship with parents

Besides relations with peers, the girls' relationships with parents also emerged as a key issue for them, though perhaps this response may be ascribed to the giving of

socially desired responses. The cellphone provides an illusion of 'protection' for both parents and their children. When both parties know each other's whereabouts, this knowledge creates an imagined sense of control. Social connection and communication have always been of fundamental importance to teens, and the cell phone is often positioned as a key feature in the maturation of teens, used by them as a symbol for coming of age, and by their parents as a means of contributing to managing the social and economic development of their children (Vincent, 2004). On the other hand, others have argued that the cellphone makes kids *too* accountable to parents, as it keeps the family's communication intact outside the home and as a result the physical home becomes less relevant and less essential. Interestingly, all the respondents first mentioned their need for cellphones to communicate with their parents, before listing other uses such as socializing with friends.

> It's quite important actually because you need to communicate with your parents and *sometimes* [my emphasis] your friends (interview, 11/10/2007).

According to Levinson (2004), part of the movement from childhood to adulthood is the transformation of 'parental tabs' from mandatory to voluntary, and the cellphone can "work at cross purposes with the transitional stage where children and just becoming adults, are taking the first full steps toward informational self-sufficiency or unaccountability to parents" (p.90). In the case of MXit specifically, girls indicated that they used it only with their friends, and to talk about a variety of issues. Almost all respondents were horrified at the prospect of their parents joining MXit and said that they would never interact with them via this medium, clearly identifying MXit as a forum for youth only. Here, as in prior studies, we see the cellphone as a tool to "define a sense of group membership, particularly vis-à-vis the older generation (Ling & Yttri, 2002, p.162). Some focus group participants even

suggested that there should be an age limit prohibiting people over a certain age from logging on.

However, one key factor that emerged in this study was that even though their parents were not welcome to interact with them via cellphones, it was the parents who paid for their cellphones, cellphone contracts or airtime. Research on youth use of mobiles in other parts of the world (Asia and Australia) highlights an increase in debt incurred by young people as a result of cellphone purchases (for example, Bell, 2006; Dowling etc al, 2008). In Sweden (and elsewhere in Europe), youth are facing bankruptcy as a result of SMS loans, which allow users who would not usually qualify for loans (teenagers, low-income groups) instant access via a text message (The Local, 2008). In South Africa there were 60 920 civil judgments for debt amounting to R560.7m in February 2008 (Statistics South Africa, 2008), and reports in mainstream media often use the term 'credit bubble' to refer to the increasing use of South Africans of credit cards and other credit facilities, and their resulting bankruptcy.

However, despite this economic trend, cellphone purchases do not appear to be a major factor in these debts and bankruptcy, probably because most youth's cellphones are paid for by their parents, together with the affordable pre-paid or 'pay-as-you-go' airtime system which allows users to top up their airtime with small amounts as needed, as opposed to paying a monthly service fee. Obtaining a cellphone contract is also relatively inexpensive, and many South Africans do so at clothing department stores, paying with their store credit cards, and receiving the cellphones free of charge (with the cost built into a small monthly fee which also includes free minutes).

Moreover, the most recently available All Media Product Survey (AMPS) figures say that on average, people spend only 3% of their incomes on cellphones; and that of the 10.2 million adults who own cellphones, 85% are pre-paid (AMPS 2005). Earlier figures showed that the average monthly spend on pre-paid cell phones is approximately R95, with contract subscribers spending an average of R390 per month (AMPS 2004). While youth perceived their ownership and use of cellphones to provide a sense of independence and freedom, ironically it reflects just the opposite, as financial reliance on their parents for their phones and/or airtime could be potentially quite limiting. While they do not themselves incur financial debt, they have another kind of 'debt' toward their parents. The largely undocumented 'taxi queen' phenomenon, briefly explored by Salo (2004), involves the purchase of cellphones and airtime to girls of school going age by minibus taxi drivers, in exchange for sexual favours.

Time and space

The second theme that emerged during the course of the research was a kind of 'softening' of time (Rheingold, 2002) and the tendency towards more flexible social networking in space and time. As one respondent indicated:

> It's a very virtual world. I mean it's kind of real but if you know the people, if they really exist and it's fun if you want to talk to your friends but it can be dangerous because anonymous people invite you all of a sudden and you don't know who they are. So you ask the person, so how did you get my contacts and they say, Oh it doesn't matter really. Then sometimes it turns out that the person is *way* older than you (interview, 23/10/ 2007).

What seemed to be of most concern to parents is the amount of time spent using MXit, and all the girls indicated that they spent large amounts of time, in some cases most of the day, on MXit, as reflected in the interview excerpts below:

Q. How many hours a day are you on MXit?

A. It varies but it also depends who is on. You know like you get those contacts who you haven't spoken to for a long time. One, I promise you, once I chatted, it was from 7 in the evening until 8 the next morning. Non-stop, with a boy…Michael. We were talking about so many things (interview, 17/09/2007).

Q. What do you think your parents think about MXit?
A. Totally bad, irritating invention from hell, because it's very time consuming. You always say OK I'm going to go on MXit for 15 minutes and then it turns out to be 2/3 hours. Yes, it's addictive you could say, but I don't know, time is different on MXit. Like OK, say for instance, if you're waiting for a reply and they take forever. I mean it's only been 10 seconds, but 10 secs is like forever, really it's like an hour. And I think that also affects the concentration span of people at school (interview, 10/10/2007).

The amount of time youth spend on MXit, as reflected above, has been an increasing source of concern for parents and teachers. The term 'addiction' has been used by youth and adults alike, and youth often used amounts of times spent on their phones, as well as installation of the MXit package on multiple phones, as markers for addiction. In some cases, girls admitted to installing the package on parents and sibling's phones, in order to chat on their handsets when their own phones were either out of airtime, or when their phones had been confiscated by school authorities. One school has created a support group for self-identified MXit 'addicts', which involves learners in discussions and has them write essays about their personal experiences on MXit (Weideman, 2007).

The cellphone provides a way of overcoming the spatial boundary of the home, for teens to talk to each other late at night and to shut out their parents and siblings. As several studies note (Ito, 2005; Green, 2002), the cellphone has revolutionalized the power geometry of space-time compression for teens in the home, enabling them to communicate without parental surveillance. Youth can call each other without having to reveal a possible romantic liaison, or at hours of the day when family members are likely to be asleep. The present study revealed that much of

the chatting on MXit happened very late at night or during the early hours of the morning.

The house phone may be tied to household collective identity, but the privacy of cellphone interaction is a more comfortable place to conduct kinds of communication that allow youth the perception of increased status within the 'power geometries' of the home. None of the respondents in the present study made use of the fixed landline, although they all lived in homes where these were available. One possible reason for this could be an increasingly common phenomena of 'blocking' the line, where parents ask the telephone operator to block outgoing calls to cellphone numbers, to limit the overall cost of the phone bill. There is a monopoly on fixed line telephone services in the country, and calls between landlines and from landlines to cellphone are quite expensive, in comparison to such costs in Europe or North America (where local calls are often free).

Overall, there was a general perception that the seemingly huge amounts of time spent chatting online via MXit, seemed to pass more quickly; and that immersion in the world of MXit was to enter a space off-limits to adults and simultaneously empowering to youth. As Campbell and Park (2008) write, time in mobile communication becomes personalized as it becomes desequenced or compressed through networked interactions. Certainly, what the present study demonstrates is the girls' reconstruction of the meaning of space and time for personal purposes as they rely on mobile telephony rather than set places and set times in their efforts to coordinate with others (Campbell and Park, 2008).

The performance of identity via MXit

The present study also identified a third major theme, and that is the use of MXit by girls in the expression of personal gender and racial identities, either via their

use of language or in the sending and receiving of personal photographs of themselves. Further, it seemed that cellphone usage and ownership alone, was intrinsically linked to sense of self, though arguably via a process of conspicuous consumption Veblen (1899/1953), of particular relevance in South Africa where youth consumption of American popular culture (and associated material possessions) has been an expression of urbanised, 'non-ethnic' identities (Dolby, 2001).

The cellphone emerged as a status symbol and a desired commodity, with the respondents indicating that their lives would be severely affected if their access to the cellphone was cut off. Responses to questions about this were common across the board, with all along the lines of the following:

> Q. How would you feel if you were separated from your cell phone?
> A. Like the way I feel during exams, depressed and deprived (interview, 10/10/2007).

Commodities or objects can be used by consumers to construct meanings of one's self, in addition to one's social identity and social relations (Lemish & Cohen 2005). Different goods acquire symbolic value for the self (Furby, 1978) in that valued material possessions act as signs of the self that are essential in their own right for continued its cultivation (Lemish & Cohen 2005). In this way, we see adolescent girls' use of cellphones as a kind of conspicuous consumption Veblen (1899/1953), where all those interviewed proudly showed off their quite expensive, newer model phones, and listed model of cellphone as an important factor.

> Q. Is the type of phone you have important, like the brand or the model?
> A. To a certain extent it does. If you do have a nice phone then people do get excited. You do have a kind of status if you come to school and you have a nicer phone. It must be a good quality phone, like it must have photos and GPRS and Internet (interview, 19/10/2007).

As Vincent (2005, 120–21 in Campbell and Park, 2008) explained, 'The very act of using a mobile phone involves the simultaneous engagement with more senses than

we use for other computational devices as we simultaneously touch, hear and see via the mobile phone in order to keep in touch with our buddies'. Campbell and Park (2008) argue that this integration with the senses opens up new forms of emotional attachment and possibilities for symbolic representation of the self. Since the cellphone is attached to the individual (versus the fixed landline), young people in particular embrace the technology as a form of symbolic expression (Green, 2003; Lobet-Maris, 2003) and rely on it to represent social status and group affiliation (Skog, 2002). Campbell and Park (2008) further argue that this might explain why the fashionable aspects of cellphones are often determined by social network interaction.

What was also interesting is the apparent trend of girls using their cellphones primarily for entertainment – chat on MXit, but more specifically, to listen to and share music, circumventing the need to own an iPod or MP3 player. Local musicians are slowly starting to tap into this, and in 2007, Cape Town hip hop/ rock group Band III released songs from their new album on MXit, allowing users to download tracks before the album's release on CD (Tromp, 2007). Similarly, on August 11, South African kwaito artist, Mandoza, spoke live with fans on MXit about his upcoming performances and new album.

Gender performativity

Respondents all indicated that an unknown chat participant's gender on MXit was immediately apparent and that gender was very important to them. From a feminist perspective (Cockburn, 1992; Lemish & Cohen 2005) technology is a process of production and consumption, a form of knowledge, a site of gender domination in addition to a power struggle. The cellphone is thus more than just hardware, but is stereotypically masculine in that it is a mechanical gadget, yet stereotypically feminine as it is used for networking (Lemish & Cohen 2005).

Gender relations in the private and public sphere may thus shape the way technologies are adopted and used. Women's social uses of the fixed phone have been credited as being responsible for the development of the practice of the device for social process-oriented functions or a "calling culture", versus merely goal-oriented activities (Fischer, 1992). So interestingly enough, studies have revealed that the cellphone makes men more 'chatty' and communicative. These networking capacities were highlighted by study participants as being one of the most important functions of their cellphone usage, particularly via MXit, as one respondent indicated:

> Boys are very manipulative. They treat girls as though they're some other thing, some dog or whatever. Phone sex. You do get groups but I'm not on those groups because they're sleazy. Oh hi, what are you wearing. These boys like invite you then they say what are you wearing, then I say clothes, oh what's under the clothes. I just do normal flirting. And then there's also, this is so difficult for me to say, but phone sex. One day I just thought ok lets see, but then it was so stupid, then I started to log off. With a boy they think if a girl does this in the virtual world, ok maybe she'll do it in the real world and then they say ok, when can we do this, where, when (interview, 10/10/2007).

For teenage girls, the cellphone exists at the intersection of competing discourses of independence, safety and femininity (Campbell, 2006). Despite the critiques of lurking sexual predators on MXit and complaints or reports of potential abuse or so-called cyber-bullying, girls in the current study allocated their cellphones an 'independence-giving' role, allowing for a 'safe' experimentation with regard to sexual activity.

Photographs

       Photographs and video files, and the ability for these to be sent via MXit, are the main ways in which this kind of sexual experimentation occurs. The cellphone has created the conditions for a new kind of photographic practice, as convergence extends the use of photography to more diverse situations and rendered its use commonplace, whereas it was previously reserved for special occasions (Rivière,

2005). Moreover, photographs are part of the process of creating and maintaining a social face (Lemish & Cohen 2005). Photographs were certainly important to this study's respondents, who all showed me pictures of themselves or their boyfriends, usually in glamorous poses, and often stored as the wallpaper picture on their phones.

A photograph is always the result of a deliberate choice, a process of selecting what we perceive that results in a conscious choice through which we operate a foregrounding of one reality over another (Rivière, 2005). Respondents indicated that there were clear differences in how photographs were used by girls and boys:

> Boys send weird pictures, like of themselves naked, and sometimes a picture is coming in and you'll just hear the girl say eeww!but there are also some girls who send pictures of themselves in underwear or something like that (interview, 22/09/ 2007).

In this case it seemed that the selection of photographs were a key part of how the girls presented themselves to others, particularly boys (and certainly one could assume vice versa as well). Psychoanalytical research (for example Tisseron 1996b) argues that taking photos is an attempt to appropriate the world by means of each gesture involved. Cellphone photos, argues Rivière (2005) might therefore define a set of norms and expectations shared by the group within which the photos are exchanged, or point to a way of representing oneself.

Further, Chemaly & Haf (2007) found that boys were more likely to have had first hand exposure to undesirable images, whereas girls were more likely to have known someone who had access to such material. Recent articles in popular magazines and newspapers (e.g. YOU Magazine and Huisgenoot, 27 July 2007) implied that MXit allowed access to pornography and allowed paedophiles to contact minors, often by pretending to be minors themselves. As a result, one respondent was quite uneasy about sending photographs of any kind.

> I never send pictures of myself. I'm paranoid. Because you send a picture to a
> boy and then they send it to all their friends (interview, 10/10/2007).

The nude or partially clothed photographs might thus be interpreted as a desire to see

oneself objectively as existing outside of one's expected social role, as well as a quest

for self-authentication that the photograph captures and authenticates (Rivière, 2005).

Photography belongs among the most primitive form of communication where people

show what they mean rather than say it. This is one area where cellphones and MXit

in particular, have been said to have many potential negative consequences for youth;

even though they emerge as such an important part of identity construction,

particularly in the representation of self to other.

<u>Racialized identities</u>

Explicit expressions of identity on MXit seemed to be mostly about creating

oppositions between 'us' and 'them', with the discourse cast overwhelmingly in

negative terms. While gender was important, respondents also indicated that race was

a factor for most, particularly in the selection of chat participants, and that racial

identity was often asked for upfront. As one respondent said:

> Normally the first thing people ask is what is your ASLR – age sex location –
> and I don't know what's wrong with some people, maybe because they're
> South African, but they add the R for race. But I don't believe in that, it's
> really stupid. I never put race and I only ask for ASL (interview, 17/09/
> 2007).

Some respondents also highlighted the fact that this sometimes results in outright

racism, or hate speech, particularly between black and so-called coloured (mixed

race) teens.

> There's a lot of racism on MXit like sometimes when you mention a xhosa
> word with a coloured person they immediately ask you what's your race? And
> then I say I'm black, well my skin isn't black but…and then they say oh, okay.
> They badmouth blacks, they call them darkies or use the K-word, and
> sometimes they ask me why do you hang out with them? But the coloured also
> use the lingo, the gamtaal like *gevaarlik* or that (interview, 16/09/ 2007).

A strong sense of a racialized identity was linked very much to language and the use of culturally or class (some would argue racialized) use of language and slang. Many of the girls felt that chatting with a boy of a different racial group would stilt the conversation, because they'd have to constantly explain or translate their commonly used slang words. In a highly racialized society like South Africa, with its history of legislated racial segregation under apartheid, this is probably not too surprising a trend; though it does mean that nearly 14 years after the country's first democratic elections, race is still more important to young people than any other markers of identity. The girls' identification with racialized identity on MXit implies that while essentially a social construct, ethnicity is a lived reality for those who identify with the in-group (Fataar, 1999).

Potential educational uses of the cellphone

Most South African schools have policies that ban cellphone use by students in the classroom, but this does not seem to prevent girls from using their phones at school and even in class. Often, the cellphone seemed to be used to circumvent the communicative limitations of the classroom situation, serving as the hi-tech version of passing notes or glances across the classroom (Ito, 2005). As Ito (2005) argues, students can use their phones to engage in a kind of personal chatter while they stay respectful of the existing power geometries of the classroom. None of the respondents would admit to actually using their cellphone in the classroom (another indication of the 3rd person effect discussed earlier), but indicated that many of their friends did.

> Q. Do you MXit during school hours?
> A. I don't but lots of people do. But you're not supposed to, it's against the school rules. With people in the school, sometimes someone right next to you. Sometimes they're laughing and you're wondering why, and it's because they're actually *MXiting* with each other. It was really out of control though last year in Maths. (interview, 17/09/2007).

Another emerging area is the possible use of cellphones for educational

purposes. The Meraka Institute, a national research centre managed by the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research (CSIR) has been working on a project called *MobilED*, and investigating the use of mobile technologies for formal and informal learning. One researcher started a "Doctor Maths" on MXit, offering Maths support for learners using the facility (Pambazuka News, 2007).

Butgereit (2007) reports on this project, which taps into the facility that allows MXit cellphone users to communicate with online computer based chat programmes like MSN or Yahoo Chat. They set up an account at *jabber.org* and called their facility *dr.math.help.me,* which targeted learners who needed help with maths homework after school hours when teachers were not available. Researchers found that the youth who participated (their sample was limited to one high school) were surprised to find that they could use their phones "as a tool instead of a toy or convenience" (p. 5), and found that learners developed a social relationship with the anonymous Dr Maths, often logging just to say hello, or asking for counseling, even though tutors were prohibited from asking or answering personal questions (Butgereit, 2007). Learners accessed Dr Maths via MXit on their cellphones, while the tutors were responding via computer based chat software.

This raises interesting points about the potential use of cellphones and/or applications like MXit to reach young people with educational or social messages, or in the provision of educational or social services such as counseling. The participants in this study, in the interviews and focus groups, identified advice seeking, a kind of peer counselling, as a major discussion topic of MXit, and somehow the technology seems to lend itself to these kinds of applications. There has been widespread use of cellphones in election campaigns around the continent (and in Europe and North America) with cellphones used to mobilize and coordinate create 'flash mobs'

engaging in protest action (Rheingold, 2002) and as powerful tools for democratic participation and the growth of civil society (Stein, 2005). Sub-saharan Africa is the world's fastest-growing wireless market and rate of growth for the entire continent has been more than 58% per year (Mbarika, 2006). In South Africa, cellphone use is widespread, particular with the introduction of pre-paid services. While only 22% of South African adults have a fixed telephone line at home, 41%, had access to a cell phone in 2005 (AMPS, 2005), and in 2008 this number is presumably higher, though more current statistics were not available at the time of writing.

Conclusions

What this exploratory study shows is that the emerging trends with regard to cellphone use by young people in South Africa is very similar to international trends. What this might suggest is that, as Ling (2004) and Campbell and Park (2008) argue, youth use cellphones to navigate and make sense of various aspects of their lives, including peer and parental relations, self-representation and identity formation.

Existing research on mobile youth culture focuses almost exclusively on general cellphone use and text messaging. What the present study raises is interesting questions about the possibilities for instant messaging (in this case the MXit application) to serve similar functions with regard to youth identity construction. With the dearth of academic literature on cellphone practices, particularly among young people, in Africa, the present study presents some indicative findings, while at the same time highlighting gaps and possibilities for future research. Within a South African context this might include further comparison between boys and girls, between different race or socio-economic groups, and also between different language groups. English seemed to be the dominant language for MXit based chat even among non-native speakers, while Afrikaans is widely used in MXit chatrooms. Further

research might also target those who do not use MXit, since the reasons for not using the software (or cellphones) might also be interesting, and those who do not use the software may have been prior users.

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