

(Im)mobile phones: “Stuckness” and mobile phones in a neighbourhood in a small town in South Africa

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study examines the role of the mobile phone in negotiating the day-to-day experience of social immobility for young users in a low-income area in a small town in South Africa. What does the mobile phone become when one is not part of a mobile globalised elite, but poor, unemployed and living on the margins of society in the global south? While research on mobile phones in developed countries suggest these devices facilitate the creation of a society free from the confines of local geography and community, where the user can craft an individualised networked sociability, this may not be the reality in the global south. In our study, mobile phones were seen to amplify a communal sociability where privacy is largely absent from the densely contiguous neighbourhood where life happens on the streets for all to see. This study demonstrates how, in a particular context, mobile phones and the mobile Internet do not necessarily facilitate a mobile world where individual networks allow an escape from local norms and structures, but may instead facilitate communal networks that bind users to the local and the co-present and so facilitate “stuckness”, a term we use to reflect social immobility and the inability to escape the disciplinary surveillance of the co-present.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2010 while conducting research into mobile phone use by South African youth, I¹ showed the young people of the township of Hooggenoeg, in the small town of Grahamstown in South Africa, adverts for mobile phone networks. The participants were completely unable to relate to the people depicted in these adverts and the mobility they exhibited. As one respondent pointed out, everyone in the adverts seemed to be going on holiday, an unimaginable situation for the Hooggenoeg youth. Most young people in Hooggenoeg were unemployed, or had insecure work as packers in supermarkets, servers in fast food joints or domestic cleaners for the white inhabitants of Grahamstown. Their lack of mobility was also manifest in the fact that all the interviewees still lived with their parents, as was the case with most young adults between the ages of 18 and 24 in Hooggenoeg. Despite their relative poverty, most of them had mobile phones that could play media and access the Internet. However, unlike the young Danish subjects in Gitte Stald's study (2008), Hooggenoeg youth could not be described as mobile, or 'on the go', beyond the confines of the township. In contrast to European on the go youth, we developed the concept 'stuckness' to refer to lack of social mobility, its associated physical immobility and a sociability predominantly restricted to the hyperlocal. Young people in South Africa exposed to inferior township schools, as those in our study have been, have skills that limit wage-earning opportunities in the labour market and translate into scant opportunity for social mobility (Louw, Van der Berg & Yu, 2007). Such marginalisation and lack of opportunity is analogous to what Burrell (2012) describes as 'involuntary immobility', an inability of marginalised people to pursue possibilities which throws into "high relief their state of stagnation and exclusion" (2012:30). As this study will demonstrate, for the youth of Hooggenoeg the mobile phone actually contributes to their lack of mobility and their experience of being 'stuck'. In line with the domestication model of technology appropriation (Silverstone, Hirsch & Morley, 1992), this paper demonstrates that the social context of use is crucial to understanding the roles played in communities and that the sometimes over-generalised assumptions that the mobile phone facilitates individualism (Castells, Fernandez-Ardevol, Qui & Say, 2007), social isolation from the co-present (Wellman, 2001; Ling, 2008; Groening, 2010), and mobility (Stald, 2008; Caron & Caronia, 2007) may not apply in all contexts.

1. CONTEXT

Nearly twenty years after apartheid has ended, South Africa remains one of the most unequal countries in the world and despite the growth of the black middle class, the vast majority of poor black people are still living in the *apartheid* spaces called 'townships' (Seekings, 2008). In Grahamstown the geography of apartheid is still strongly evident. On the West side of the town one finds quaint Victorian houses, green lawns, large school grounds and the university – still predominantly occupied by white inhabitants with the occasional black academic, civil servant and businessperson. On the Eastern side, houses are small and streets dusty; only black people live here. This is where Hooggenoeg is situated. This township is a low-cost housing project,

¹ The 'I' refers to Alette Schoon who collected the primary data for this research.

located on a wind-swept rim nearly an hour's walk away from the town centre. Houses are funded by government, with owners poor enough to receive state aid.

A particular context of poverty shapes sociability in this community. For, just like many other South African townships, Hooggenoeg is a localised social space, shaped by the constant pedestrian movement on the streets that characterises township life (Mbembe, Dlamini & Khunou, 2004). While middle-class South Africans experience their social community as separate nodes traversed by car journeys, township social community is experienced as a contiguous space where the neighbourhood is integrated into everyday life (Bray, Gooskens, Kahn, Moses & Seekings, 2010). This dense spatial sociability is necessitated through economic hardship where survival requires strong ties with those in close proximity (Bray et al., 2010). Kopana Matlwa in her novel *Coconut*, graphically captures how township sociability differs from that of the suburbs:

No toddlers with snotty noses and grubby hands play in the streets of Little Valley Country Estate. Groups of teenage girls in bright T-shirts, old torn jeans and peak caps do not sit on the front lawn pointing and gossiping about the guys that walk past the gates of their homes. Older sisters do not play the waillese (wireless) loud, so that those who know the tune can sing along as each mops, dusts and sweeps their house clean. In Little Valley Country Estate the neighbours are the cars parked in driveways and the children are the tennis balls that fly over the wall and into your pool. (2007:89).

Hooggenoeg's 11 streets and 224 houses can be characterised as a 'knowable community' (Williams 1969) in which all the inhabitants are integrated into the same dense social network. Most young people attend the same school, and socialise in the same neighbourhood space. As in other South African townships, the material conditions of housing contribute to social visibility and sociability in this community. For example, most houses observed in Hooggenoeg have a single inside tap while the outside tap, usually attached to the toilet, is used for laundry and personal washing. There is also little privacy between family members inside the house, as most houses comprise only two rooms separated by a curtain.

While there is a paucity of research on Hooggenoeg, studies show that in similar areas or townships in Grahamstown East with populations that are black and poor, unemployment is about 70% (Alebiosu, 2006) with higher figures for youth unemployment (STATSSA, 2011). Few of the young people in the study had jobs, and these were low-income and informal. Their lack of educational qualifications put a ceiling on their employment prospects. All had attended the single institution servicing the community, namely the Mary Waters School. Like other South African township schools with their poorly-qualified teachers and under-resourced facilities (Van den Burg, 2007), the quality of education offered by this institution restricts rather than facilitates social mobility².

² Out of the 111 final year students at Mary Waters in 2011 for example, only 58 passed and a mere 8 qualified for university education. See <http://www.grocotts.co.za/content/mixed-matric-fortunes-local-schools-05-01-2012>

While young people generally seem to remain in their parents' homes, stuck, with no immediate prospects of a future elsewhere, the global world flows into Hooggenoeg. It is a globalised and mediatised space, with the television sets switched on all day and the youth observed skilled not only in using their mobile phones, but in a whole range of media such as television games, flash-stick based video and audio players, and even computers. South Africa has particularly high mobile phone penetration, and in 2009 already nearly 90% of South Africans owned a mobile (ITU, 2009). However, most young people cannot afford smartphones with their seamless social media integration, and tend to own the less sophisticated yet internet-enabled feature phones, and this, combined with the exorbitant prices of texting, have made the South African chat application Mxit particularly popular at that time.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

2.1 Mobility

Gitte Stald's study (2008) of young adults in Denmark, describes how young people consider their mobile phones to be synonymous with the social and physical mobility they experience. Urry (2000) argues that, in fact, *all* communication technology impacts on our daily practices by promoting more mobile lifestyles. This results from the basic need for occasional face-to-face meetings with others in the geographically 'stretched out' social networks that this technology enables (Urry, 2000:231). Mobility tends to increase even more when the communication device is portable, like a mobile phone, as the point of communication becomes a 'moving site' (Gumpert & Drucker, 2007:8), and users are able to transcend space and time through this 'mobility-creating' technology (Caron & Caronia, 2007:4). Advertising messages further promote the mobile phone's ability to increase mobility, with pay-off lines such as the Nokia E7's – "Success is staying in touch on the go", – referring not only to mobile telephony, but also mobile internet and mobile social networks (MobileConnectZA, 2011). It has therefore been argued that the mobile phone creates a "new nomadic identity" for the user (Caron & Caronia, 2007:6).

2.2 Networked individualism and mobile privatisation

Castells et al. (2007:250) emphasise a recent change in sociability characterised by increased personal connectivity and supported by the materiality of the network. They argue that, in the developing world, mobile phones are often the only phone the user possesses. Given this, connectivity or 'perpetual contact' is an important consequence of adopting the mobile phone (Katz & Aakhus, 2002). Castells et al. (2007:171) argue that such personal connectivity is contributing to an increasingly individualised society. It is now normal and acceptable to disengage with those who are present in the same physical space – the 'co-present' – and retreat into a space of one's own making, a parallel 'space of flows' in which one can interact with a social circle of choice, enabled by technological devices such as the mobile phone (Castells et al., 2007:251; Ito & Okabe, 2005:17). This new type of sociability, due to new communications technologies, is not based on traditional spatial communities

characterised by "the sharing of values and social organization" locally (Castells, 2001:127), but by networks of selective ties. This shift in sociability is described in Castells' earlier work on the impact of the Internet to create the 'network society':

New technological developments seem to enhance the chances for networked individualism to become the dominant form of sociability. The growing stream of studies on the uses of mobile phones seems to indicate that cell-telephony fits a social pattern organized around 'communities of choice,' and individualized interaction, based on the selection of time, place, and partners of the interaction (Kopomaa, 2000; Nafus & Tracey, 2000). The projected development of the wireless Internet increases the chances of personalized networking to a wide range of social situations, thus enhancing the capacity of individuals to rebuild structures of sociability from the bottom up. These trends are tantamount to the triumph of the individual, although the costs for society are still unclear. (2001:132-133).

This increased individualism may be enhanced through using the mobile phone for the consumption of media to create a private space of 'mobile privatisation' that "...strengthens separation, seclusion and isolation while offering virtual commonality, intimacy and connection..." (Groening, 2010:1344).

Groening (2010) describes how the advent of mobile media has extended Raymond Williams' discussion of mobile 'privatisation' of the world viewed through the public isolation of the lounge, to include the maintenance of privacy in public spaces. Joggers who first used the Sony Walkman to create a 'private bubble' provoked criticism for disobeying the social acknowledgement expected in a public space (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay & Negus, 1997). Today, the ubiquity of portable media such as the mobile phone has normalised "the possibility of social interaction without the burden of social obligation" (Groening, 2010:1344). Wellman goes so far as to argue that new communication technologies allow users to increasingly disengage from the co-present space:

Their use shift community ties from linking people-in-place to linking people wherever they are. Because the connection is to the person and not to the place, it shifts the dynamics of connectivity from places – typically households or worksites – to individuals. The shift to a personalized, wireless world affords truly *personal communities* that supply support, sociability, information and a sense of belonging separately to each individual. It is the individual, and neither the household nor the group, that is the primary unit of connectivity. (2001:238).

Mobile phone users seem to be forming virtual cliques that emotionally shut themselves off in an isolated experience of the world – "walled gardens of bounded solidarity" – where they increasingly ignore the co-present (Ling, 2008:163). Western cultural practices that allow such public disengagement are not necessarily technologically determined, but are arguably rooted in the development of Western modernity. As Europe modernised, and urbanisation

and displaced commuters became the norm, space was no longer experienced as contiguous and intimate. It became dispersed nodes of places where a neighbourhood was just a place to live, not a space of social ties (Allen, cited in Morley, 2000:177). The anonymity that came to define Western middle-class society is produced not only by modern technology such as the car or the walls around houses, but by a culture of public anonymity that precludes staring or drawing attention to oneself (Garland-Thomson, 2009). This is in stark contrast to African value systems like *Ubuntu*, where the recognition of others is central and “a person is a person because of others” (Nussbaum, 2003:2), thus arguably the antithesis of a culture of public anonymity. While Western individualism may indeed be supported by information and communications technology (ICT), a communal sociability might similarly be aided by such technologies in other contexts. This can be observed in the Jamaican ‘link-up’ phone calls discussed by Horst and Miller (2006:89), in which strangers who are casually encountered on the street are routinely added as contacts and frequently contacted. Similarly, in particular contexts in the developing world, the mobile phone may be neither personal nor mobile, but serve as a stationary family phone (Ureta, 2008).

In order to understand how a particular context impacts on a specific use of technology, in 2010 we conducted qualitative in-depth interviews with eleven young adults between the age of 18 and 24³ living in Hooggenoeg, followed by two gender-based focus groups of the same young people and their friends. This gender division was prompted when preliminary research revealed the central role of the mobile phone in courting practices, the discussion of which created discomfort in mixed gender groups. Respondents were selected using a snowball-sampling based on age, out-of-school status and ownership of a mobile phone. Interviewees were not selected to be representative of the Hooggenoeg community as a whole, as the aim of the research was not to generalise results for the area, but to compare the international literature to examples of local practice and look for similarities and differences (see Bryman, 1988). For ethical reasons, the identity of all respondents were protected by using pseudonyms.

International literature suggests that the mobile phone is used in particular ways in poor communities in the Global South such as Hooggenoeg, and that the generalisations made in the developing world around global mobile phone use need to be revisited (Horst & Miller, 2006; Pertierra, 2005; Donner, 2007; Hahn & Kibora, 2008). Hooggenoeg was thus chosen not primarily for its racial identity but also for its socio-economic character, as houses in this type of low-income settlement are only allocated to people who subsist on working-class wages or on grants. Although Grahamstown has several other such low-income settlements, Hooggenoeg was also selected for pragmatic reasons, as the residents are mainly speakers of Afrikaans, which is the first language of the primary researcher.

³ Moffet (2006) shows that South Africa has the worst gender violence statistics for any country not at war in the world, and attributes this to a particular form of patriarchy informed by apartheid hierarchies of power, where a culture in which violence by dominant groups is seen as justifiable, is perpetuated.

3. FINDINGS

The research explores how young people in Hooggenoeg negotiate the significance of the mobile phone in relation to their own stuckness, and further investigates to what extent the mobile phone contributes to physical and social mobility and the ability to construct individualised networks free from communal norms.

Research findings indicate that the ownership of a mobile phone, rather than enabling mobility, actually restricts the movement of young people in the crime-ridden context of Hooggenoeg and its immediate environs. Grahamstown is in the Cacadu district, and a recent survey found this to be the region in South Africa with the highest murder rate (SAIRR, 2011), with 42 murders in the town alone in 2010 (Jijana, 2011). While in the developed world mobile phones are seen to provide security by allowing young adults to be within easy call for assistance even as they move through their environment (Ling, 2004:99), Hooggenoeg youths lack this 'perpetual contact' (Katz & Aakhus, 2002), a result of poverty which translates into restricted airtime for voice calls. In the neighbourhood young adults know one another and violent crime is restricted to the odd drunken brawl. However, as soon as they enter other township areas outside this 'knowable community' (Williams, 1969), they are targeted as strangers, often by criminal 'crews', particularly if they displayed their mobile phones. The display of a mobile phone therefore rendered a person a possible target of crime and violence. Beronice was pistol-whipped when she agreed to hand over her phone, but tried negotiating to keep her SIM card. Xolile was also robbed and had his jaw broken with an iron pole, when walking in a nearby township listening to music on his phone. The mobile phone consequently discourages mobility because it increases the possibility of becoming the object of violence while on the move. In these situations, therefore, the mobile phone does not promote the 'on the go' mobility of young adults described by Stald (2008). In fact, in pedestrian neighbourhoods where crime is rampant, mobile phone ownership may discourage mobility.

For the youth in Denmark the mobile phone is a "personal mobile log" (Stald 2008:157) of reminiscences producing a sense of self. Sharing this with close friends includes "others within one's private sphere" (2008:158). There, the mobile, along with its media, seems to be regarded as personal property. In contrast, for many South African township-based youths, such data is regarded as communal property (Walton, Hassreiter, Marsden & Allen, 2012) and friends may browse the log without invitation, as one would examine an online social media profile. This portrays a communal sociability where resistance to such practice can result in accusations of "stinginess, disrespect or secretiveness" (Walton et al., 2012:403). In addition, in Hooggenoeg the public/private nature of logs has a gendered dimension, and seems to reflect and amplify gender relations and differences⁴. Some of our male Hooggenoeg interviewees were able to resist such sharing practices and for them, as for Stald's subjects, the mobile phone is indeed

⁴ Moffet (2006) shows that South Africa has the worst gender violence statistics for any country not at war in the world, and attributes this to a particular form of patriarchy informed by apartheid hierarchies of power, where a culture in which violence by dominant groups is seen as justifiable, is perpetuated.

a private sphere. One male interviewee stated “the phone is my only privacy”. He experienced daily life as public with no possibility of solitude, with friends and family constantly moving through his bedroom. Another male interviewee was so keen to maintain his privacy that he carried his charger and phone everywhere he went, to prevent friends and family from browsing his mobile log on his charging phone. Young men in this community clearly felt the need to protect their phone logs from the communal gaze. The ability of these young men to resist this scrutiny could be explained by the higher status accorded to them, a result of the transition into manhood by means of the Xhosa circumcision ritual that had rendered them *boetas* (big brothers). In contrast, many women were monitored via their mobile logs. They were subject to frequent ‘phone inspections’ by boyfriends and family members, who would scrutinise the phone logs of their received calls, their messages, their photographs and even their contact lists. In this situation the digital traces of personal relationships on the mobile phone provided ways for others to police their lives, limiting their ability to construct independent individual networks (Castells et al., 2007).

Amanda: Sometimes it is just a message that has come through and now he does not know that number. Then he just becomes jealous and throws your phone against the wall, for no reason, about a silly message.

The Hooggenoeg women have developed a range of tactical responses: They would regularly manage these phone logs, erasing data constantly, even going so far as saving some phone numbers for young men under female pseudonyms.

Beronic: I’m being honest. Eric goes through my phone, he looks at who has phoned me, who has sent messages and who I have phoned, and sometimes I just delete it all (laughs). Then there’s nothing to see!

Thus the affordances of the phone to erase and change such data enabled them to carve out some private space for themselves. For the female interviewees the ability of the chat application Mxit to hide data was also one of the most appreciated features, whereas for male ‘inspectors’ it was a cause of frustration:

Xolile: I mean, you are going to receive calls and see that number: OK, this person has called that person. And maybe an SMS: some days you forget to delete an SMS from your phone...But Mxit!

Danny: The minute she logs off you can’t see it.

These young men saw such monitoring as normal and part of their roles as boyfriends. In a deeply patriarchal space such as South Africa (Moffett, 2006), the phone becomes a tool of control, not of autonomy. What our findings demonstrate is that within the Hooggenoeg context of patriarchy and poverty, the mobile phone does not necessarily enable young women to create the truly “personal communities” that Wellman (2001) refers to. Instead, their social interactions are influenced by local communal norms which are enforced through these ‘inspections’.

In this community it was also not possible to use media to create a bubble of 'mobile privatization' (Groening, 2010) to escape public life while moving through it in absent-presence. In line with the values of *Ubuntu* (Nussbaum, 2003), acknowledging people in the co-present communal space was important to maintain one's own place in the community. Young people did, however, use their mobile phones to create backchannels where they could discreetly have private discussions. There were many stories of public gatherings, such as weddings, where flirting with others in the same room would happen on the backchannels, while the user kept up respectable engagement with everyone in the co-present. In this way the mobile phone allowed greater freedom of association, but the association was still focused on those in the co-present.

One of the most striking examples of such digitally-augmented public interactions was the 'stroll', a local courting ritual. Every evening, groups of young men would walk the 11 streets of Hooggenoeg, with a mobile phone providing the soundtrack. The young women would stand in front of their gates and the young men might stop to chat or exchange Mxit handles. Young women demonstrated their modesty by not straying far from home. If a young man sensed that a young woman liked him, he would engage in what they called a 'fifty-fifty', where he sent a chat message to her, to walk halfway towards him down the street. Such online interactions however, prioritise face-to-face networks in the same space, not networks with the absent-present. Thus, unlike the individualised networks that Castells et al. (2007) describe, where diverse connections across space allow an individual to craft a personal network outside the constrictions of local norms, these backchannels, despite the relative freedom they permit, are generally restricted to co-present networks in public space. They thus reflect and contribute to the stuckness and the accompanying limited sociability experienced by young adults in Hooggenoeg.

This stuckness also ensues from the experience of being under constant surveillance. All the interviewees complained about being watched, and the mobile phone was extensively used in this practice. Surveillance and gossip were part of local culture, and had an online presence that contributed to keeping these young adults 'in their place'. Inhabitants accessed a mobile WAPsite called *Outoilet* (Old Toilet) to read and post gossip anonymously about their own community. At the time of the research the site was notorious in many working-class areas in South Africa (Peterson, 2010; Malala, 2010a, 2010b). Organised in terms of South African geographical areas, each place experienced the site as a hub of local gossip. In the Hooggenoeg community, gossip accessed on smartphones through Outoilet was relayed via feature phones on Mxit.

Danny: One of them would be on Outoilet, the rest would be on Mxit, sending out this, this, this and saying: 'Go to Outoilet and you should see this, this and this'... That's how they do it. So one's got the info, and the others are like sending the info out.

In this way the mobile technology rendered this web of surveillance even more immediate, dense and extensive, creating a digital gossip network that mirrored the place-based gossip network. While surveillance is conventionally understood as a hierarchical process where a powerful watcher gathers information about passive individuals who are being watched, 'peer surveillance'

describes data-gathering that is not necessarily hierarchical and that emerges from online social networking (Albrechtslund, 2008:6). Clinton, one of the young men from Hooggenoeg, had experienced the immediacy of such digital surveillance first-hand:

I was walking down there...Bauke Street...the dogs were chasing me and then I kicked the dogs...only to find out that a girl that's living there by the Albany lounge down there... she saw me at the library she asked me is my name Clinton, I say yes. She said: 'No, man' she sees that I'm on Outoilet kicking dogs and doing what-what... . Why was I kicking the dogs?'

The gossip culture illustrated here and reinforced by the use of Outoilet, was, however, not simply an invasion of privacy. It was also a type of class-policing similar to the Australian 'tall poppy syndrome' (Peeters, 2004:1), where those who attempted to rise above what was perceived to be the ceiling of social mobility appropriate for someone from Hooggenoeg were targeted for gossip, had their reputations destroyed and were ostracised from the rest of the community (Schoon, 2012). Local gossip not only accused the socially mobile of sexual and criminal indiscretions, but also of practising witchcraft (Schoon & Strelitz, in press). Such labelling discourages social mobility, and the mobile phone contributes to the stuckness through the networks of communal surveillance that police and replicate social life in Hooggenoeg.

Unlike Stald's (2008) older interviewees who used their phones to facilitate their mobility on the streets, the Hooggenoeg young adults use their mobile phones to escape from the streets and its gossip, contributing to their stuckness.

Beronice: I'm sitting in my house, I'm not dying, I'm sitting in my house. I don't need buddies, I have my phone.

During those those vulnerable periods when she felt herself the target of gossip, Beronice isolated herself from her co-present friends, who could easily tap into online and offline gossip networks. Instead, she cultivated online-only Mxit friends of the opposite sex in other, distant parts of South Africa, which provided a fantasy of possible romance and escape. Most importantly, these friends were outside the communal gossip network. She classified her Mxit relationships according to geographical town names, and had one special friend in Johannesburg, South Africa's largest city. Whenever she felt targeted by local gossips, she would turn to him to share her problems with, and to get courage to face the day.

Beronice: Me and him tell each other lots of things and it's nice to talk to someone and to maybe say you are feeling down and he will boost your spirits. And when you feel the whole world is coming down on you, that's when I go onto Mxit to chat. And if he's not online I will give him a missed call so that he goes online. And if he's feeling depressed he will do the same.

It is in such Mxit relationships that one starts to observe something resembling the individualised networks referred to by Castells et al. (2007) and Wellman (2001), where the connection is facilitated by the individual rather than through a sociability shaped by the local space or community. Other young people shared similar stories of how Mxit friends allow them to escape the co-present. Danny struggled with staying out of fights in the township. Whenever someone insulted one of his friends, which happened often, he was expected to stand up and defend their reputation. One friend had recently died in such a fight and Danny was terrified that the same thing could happen to him. On Mxit he could move out of that macho world and relax in the company of young women.

Danny: Then you end up like being in a place where you feel like you're drawn away, completely away from your problems. You're just now in a different world, where you're doing something different, where you're helping.

Danny's brother Xolile had a taxing job at a fast food outlet. As a result he had no energy to go out at night. For the last two years he had spent evenings chatting on Mxit to a young woman in Upington, a large town in the Northern Cape, a distance away. He didn't share many of his feelings with his 'real' girlfriend in Grahamstown, but it was different with this more long-term online-only relationship, which had recently progressed to a voice call relationship.

Xolile: Most of the time we do call each other with the Vodacom free minutes at midnight. We talk [for] hours and hours and hours. I am actually her Mxit boyfriend and she said that she is my Mxit girlfriend.

Despite the depth of the relationship, Xolile did not think it was realistic that he would ever meet her face to face, as they both had other 'real' partners and small children from previous partners. In this way Mxit seemed to enable the creation of alternative individualised networks separate from the dense communal surveillance networks that were keeping the young people in Hoogenoeg stuck. Notwithstanding the fantasies of romance and escape that these Mxit contact sessions produced, they primarily seemed to be a therapeutic tool in coping with the lack of hope and escape that dominated the immediate environment of the participants. Mxit contact did not fuel mobility or opportunity, and young people were all very aware that no one actually dared to meet their Mxit friends offline, partly because of the panic caused by reports in the South African media on the dangers of such meetings.

In some senses these Mxit relationships were underpinned by fantasies of urbanisation, of getting out, and escaping stuckness. Danny is particularly drawn to the idea of living in a city. He grew up with a close relationship to the white family that employed his mother as a domestic worker. As a result he speaks perfect English with a middle-class accent. However, as he had dropped out of school, there are no opportunities for him in Grahamstown. His dreams of social mobility are fuelled by socialising with middle class private school and university students in town, who sometimes mistake him for one of 'them'. He is certain things would be different elsewhere, and spends time on Mxit with young women from cities, discussing how he deserves to live the

'big city life' because he had 'big city style'. He also has a few friends in other towns and uses their conversations as a way of measuring his own situation, a process of 'symbolic distancing' in which, according to Thompson, the consumption of global media by local audiences often provides meanings which enable "the accentuation of symbolic distancing from the spatial-temporal contexts of everyday life" (1995:175).

Danny: You learn what life is like over there, are there any...more opportunities... than there are here? Then you compare your life...and the other person's life...to find out that: OK, we're more fortunate, or we're less fortunate. You look both ways. And by doing this, you know exactly where you stand, and where you're going to.

Unfortunately these young people are not going anywhere. In the two years since the research was concluded, many of them have migrated from Mxit to Facebook, but all of them are still living in the neighbourhood they grew up in, some with some casual work, but most unemployed and with little chance of social mobility.

4. CONCLUSION

This study has attempted to investigate how young people use their mobile phones to navigate physical and social immobility and being stuck in a densely populated space with a localised sociability, spending their days circulating the streets. The research suggests that, in this specific context, the device was instrumental in keeping them stuck, at best only able to alleviate their stress by providing fantasies of escape.

The mobile phone enhanced the threat of becoming a victim of crime on the borders of the neighbourhood, thereby limiting mobility. Mobility was further restricted through the how the phone was used – assisting with or, alternatively, avoiding communal surveillance – a social process that seemed to curtail both physical and social mobility. It was particularly young women who were at the mercy of such surveillance through regular phone inspections, which restricted contacts to those 'approved' by the men in their lives and hence discouraged the freedom of 'networked individualism' (Castells, 2001:132). We argued that sociability facilitated by mobile phones in hyperlocal, place-based networks restrict young people's mobility. This is despite the fact that some practices may provide relief from the communal gaze, as evidenced in the private messages on the backchannels young people create to text others around them. The mobile Internet, was, however, instrumental in maintaining and enhancing community surveillance networks through the WAPsite Outoilet, which together with the text chat application Mxit, provided a local channel for gossip. As the young people withdrew from public interaction to avoid becoming the subjects of such gossip, they increasingly turned to online-only Mxit friends, who offered a fantasy of romantic and physical escape, as well as therapeutic counselling. While such online-only friends from across South Africa allow young people to imagine themselves mobile and able to cultivate a social circle free from communal norms, its value is debatable, as it remains a fantasy that merely alleviates the stress of being stuck.

The study therefore suggests that just as a generation of young adults in the developed world may use their mobile phones to become increasingly mobile (e.g. Stald, 2008), a group of young adults in the global south may do the converse and their mobile phones may at times assist in keeping them stuck.

The modernist assumptions that technology inevitably allows one to move from the communal to networked individualism (Castells, 2001:132) may indeed not be a universal story, and further research is needed to look at mobile technology and the cultivation of communal ICT networks focused on the co-present.

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