

# Chat spaces

For some young people today, mobile phones and remote social networking are their ticket to the outside world, for some, their key to survival. But this mode of communication is also rife with sexism and harassment. But something is being done to make it safer. By Marion Stevens and Sally Shackelton

"i lyk MXIT 2 couz u cn express ur feeling to ur mxit frnds. but sometymis ntgud 2 chat couz u meet wth wrng ppl. i heard a story abt a gal 4rom

Young people in South Africa face significant challenges. Employment opportunities are few, rates of HIV infection are among the highest in the world, and violence is rife. According to Love Life, social networking plays into the three triggers of social change – a sense of identity, belonging and purpose.

In their ongoing endeavour to make mobile phones safer, Womensnet, under the directorship of Sally Shackelton, together with Girlsnet, held two focus groups with people ranging in age from 15 to 31 from Orange Farm, south of Johannesburg.

## Mobile phone versus internet

The number of people accessing the Internet with their mobile phones in South Africa outnumbers those accessing this resource with traditional methods like computers. South Africa ranks number six on the global list of mobile Internet users – ahead of both the UK and the US. According to Opera Software's "State of the Mobile Web" report, mobile social networking consumes more than 60% of mobile web traffic in South Africa.

This shouldn't be surprising as mobile phone penetration far outstrips any other communication device available – including traditional landline phones. This is why our focus has been on mobile social networks, and accessing social networks via cellphones.

Research shows that:

- 78.7% of rural respondents in a study reported that it improved their relationships
- 77.4% reported that they would call rather than travel to family and friends
- 26.5% said cell phones were useful in emergencies
- 15.5% used them to find a job
- 83% respondents in five rural communities in KZN, owned a cell phone
- 80% knew how to send and receive SMS's
- 76% used their phones to make voice calls to follow up on social welfare, water, sanitation and electricity applications, or income generating opportunities.

These statistics show that a mobile phone is an important communications and social networking tool – replacing expensive visits to family, and improving relationships (especially in a country marked by migrant labour patterns).

In terms of gender, in South Africa little difference exists in cell phone ownership (in 2005 a study reported a five percent difference

in favour of men). In terms of age, the same study stated that ownership is highest amongst those between the ages of 30 and 34 (52.5%), followed by those between 25 and 29 years (51.3%) and 35 and 39 years (50.2%), with ownership dropping sharply after the 45 to 49 age range. More than half of the respondents said they did not ever share their cell phones, while 45% said they occasionally shared, and only 23% said their phones were regularly used by their family.

## South African networks

### MYMsta

A Love Life initiative, this mobile social network: "provides a way to connect young South Africans to opportunities while at the same time helping them to define their identities through focusing on the empowerment of youth around HIV/Aids and the social determinants of high-risk behaviour," says Duncan Harling, Love Life's Mobile Marketing Specialist. MYMsta was launched in June 2008 and, as at February 2009, had 30 000 users. Its primary objective is to create links to opportunities and links with Love Life's face-to-face network of peer educators.

MYMsta allows users to join groups, post forums, make comments about news stories, manage their own user profile, and ask questions and get advice from professional counselors on the network. It also has a Careers portal, where users can undergo a brain profile and personality profile test which links to possible careers. Users can also access bursary, learnership or volunteer opportunities and join discussion groups.

MYMsta allows users to make friends, learn about HIV / Aids and healthy lifestyles and generally gives them the tools to navigate through life successfully. It also offers movie reviews, music reviews, ringtones, videos, pictures and then links these to competitions.

### MXIT

MXIT has 12 million subscribers processing 250 million messages a day. Less than five percent of the user base use the chat room facility. It is a free mobile messaging service that provides text-based communication to GPRS/3g-enabled users. The aim is to create a global community with access to communication and entertainment services. The maximum length of chat messages is 2048 characters compared to normal SMS at 160 characters.

## Youth group study

Womensnet did work with youth groups around Orange Farm, a



semi-urban settlement south of Johannesburg, to find out how they use these social networking platforms.

Mixit was the only social network the participants were aware of. No one had heard of any of the network tools, nor of MYMsta. No participants had a land-line phone at home.

In a word association game, participants were asked to say the first thing that came into their heads in response to a few selected words. The responses to the word "HIV" were overwhelmingly negative – with associations such as disease, killer, death, sickness, depression, suicide, graveyard and sweats. Comments relating to technologies were generally positive or value free, except for a few about MXIT (made by girls).

Notable about girls' use of technology was their lack of freedom when using chat spaces. For the most part, girls felt unsafe and uncomfortable about using MXIT, while the male participants felt confident even about using these platforms for dating "chics".

It stands to reason that "virtual" spaces reflect the realities of day to day life for South African girls. Sexual harassment, sexual violence and domestic and dating violence is common. In addition, male participants felt these spaces were safe. They spoke about dating and flirting online, while girls talked about environments in which they felt unsafe and where they were harassed. Parents also didn't approve of MXIT – for safety and because they felt their children spent too much time on their phones.

This was also evident in the confidence with which young men spoke about their use of technologies, whereas girls were far less confident and more fearful of admitting their use of MXIT and their cellphones in general.

### Getting airtime

Girls cited parents and boyfriends as a source of money for airtime. Worryingly, cellphones and airtime have been implicated as a motivator in the phenomenon of transactional sex, where young women engage in sexual relationships with much older men in exchange for material goods or payments for school fees etc. Using applications like MXIT or MYMsta is very inexpensive, but the use of these applications are combined with SMS calls and downloading music/ringtones. Girls in the group jokingly referred to the "Minister of Airtime" – a reference to transactional sex for airtime.

*Girls: I get it (airtime) from one of my parents, I save pocket money, "chicken" (boyfriend).*

*Lebo: Is chicken a boyfriend or just a person you just use to get your airtime?*

*Girl D\*: Let's say for example you come across a guy, and he then asks for your phone number. The day the guy calls I ask for airtime and then after delete all his details to a point of diverting his call to voicemail.*

According to the African E-Index 2005, respondents stated that their mobile phones were a key to survival and that anything can really be sacrificed to ensure that the mobile phone has even a few cents credit. For example, faced with a choice between eating lunch or buying airtime, many people chose airtime.

Cellphones were also a status symbol. While girls insisted that the phone doesn't make the girl, they clearly felt a little embarrassed and sorry for our one participant who didn't have one.

### What information is accessed?

Participants used their cellphones to download music, ring tones and read horoscopes and also chat about school work and gossip. Girls download items they can use on their phones. So, for the most part, social networks are purely for fun, gossip and "light" information. Personal face-to-face relationships, or calling, are for

advice on relationships or health. Girls do, however, make use of the HIV Health line, and send "please call me" messages:

*Girl: I just read an advertisement on my phone after sending a "please call me" message.*

*Lebo: So you can call the number displayed underneath?*

*Girl: Yes, sometimes I send an sms for free with your details and then they call you back.*

*Lebo: Do they really call back?*

*Girl: Yah, sometimes they do.*

*Lebo: Do you remember those organizations?*

*Girl: AIDS Help-line*

*Sarah: And even for loans or scholarships. Others allow "please call me" messages and then others you send an sms with your name.*

*Girls: Others specify what you should send, and you get all the information on your phone, as long as it is not a land line number.*

The private nature of cellphone "chats", allowing girls to communicate without parental surveillance, can be a positive or negative. In some ways, in spite of MXIT policies and advice for parents, this conspiratory tone is encouraged by marketing strategies such as the Engen "Endless Summer Campaign" targeted at 11- to 18-year-olds.

The aim of the campaign was to "keep kids busy on the back seat and get them to pester parents to stop at the next Engen convenience store, using key words". The only mention of what to do with the keywords was on MXIT. No mention was made on the posters. This spread the viral element so that kids knew what the keywords meant, but the parents didn't.

There is potential to provide information that users might find too embarrassing, or perhaps just don't have adults to turn to. MYMsta (especially since it is linked to face-to-face support) perhaps might fill this gap. However, they seem to offer much the same content (music, ring tones, entertainment news) as MXIT. Another study revealed "the privacy of cellphone interaction is a more comfortable place to conduct the kinds of communication that allow youth the perception of increased status within the "power geometries" of the home.

### Addiction and social networking

A concern of many parents and teachers is the "addictive" nature of digital social networks. The term "addiction" has been used by youth and adults alike, and youth often used the amount of time spent on their phones, as well as installation of the MXIT package on multiple phones, as markers for addiction.

*Lebo: Oh, so you don't mind if you stay for long not chatting? How much time do you spend chatting, in a week for example?*

*Katlego: If I don't go to school for a day, for instance, I spend four hours chatting.*

*Lebo: 4hours? (shock)*

*Keba: It's not too much?*

*Lebo: Chatting for four hours?*

*Keba: Yes. You don't take note of time.*

### Results and recommendations from Women'sNet

Young men and women talked about using social networks in very different ways. Young men were confident and outspoken about their use, while girls were shy and secretive. The young men talked openly, showing off how they used technology – specifically social networks for getting dates, organising their social lives and communicating with friends. This was in contrast to young women, who were more secretive and less confident about their use of cellphones.

Based on their interactions with these young people, and in their

work, Women'sNet made the following recommendations:

### 1. Engaging in public/private partnerships

Young women's use of social networks was curtailed by experiences of harassment and sexual violence, and by parental and adult disapproval. Partnerships between service providers (like MXIT) and organisations that work with girls have the potential to assist service providers in offering safer spaces for young women, and also to allay the fears of parents, teachers and adults who are concerned about the safety of girls using these tools. In addition, these organisations can offer feedback to service providers about keeping spaces that young people use, safe.

### 2. Addressing conspiratorial nature of mobile social networks

Social networks that are popular among young people tend to encourage an atmosphere of conspiratorial communication – where spaces are marked by communication that is exclusive and secretive. This aspect of social networks is exploited through marketing campaigns. This must be addressed, and mobile social networks that have a social benefit must aim to counter this culture.

### 3. A culture of bravado, bragging, machismo must be addressed

Our investigations revealed a high level of masculine bravado about "chics", "beauties" and dating. Real life pressures for young men to be macho and to speak about young women in these terms is extended to virtual spaces. This, in contrast to young women, some of whom had stopped using social networks on the

phones because of sexual harassment. In order to address the sexist nature of these communications, a different approach must be sought – one that is transformative rather than operating within a system of sexism and inequality.

### 4. Engaging with young people About Rights and Responsibilities

We must engage with young women – and men – where they gather (schools, social spaces, clubs etc) to educate them about their rights and responsibilities in online communications. Girls, especially, must be given information on recognising abuse, how to address it, and how to make complaints and get assistance when they are harassed in virtual spaces.

### 5. Teachers, parents and management

In addition, there must be some engagement with teachers, parents and school management to help them encourage responsible use and top-help them to address problems when they occur. So, rather than prohibiting use or supervising use, adults take a more empowering role in young people's use of social networks and mobile technologies generally.

### 6. Creating girls-only spaces – and linking this to real life

It's our suggestion that there be spaces for girls to engage in that are just for them, and that these spaces are linked to real life supportive services. **NU**

**Keep your chats  
exactly that!**

Girls'Net

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<http://www.womensnet.org.za> email: [women@womensnet.org.za](mailto:women@womensnet.org.za) Taking a Byte out of Gender Injustice

Girls'Net, a daughter project of Women'sNet, has embarked on a campaign to promote safe and assertive use of phone chats and other forms of social networking tools. This campaign aims to empower young people to prevent them from becoming victims of harassment, bullying and violence when using the internet and cell phones. Additionally, we aim to help young people use these tools in affirmative ways to advocate for change on issues of concern to them.

#### Background of the Campaign:

Through the "Keep your Chats Exactly That!" campaign, we seek to empower young people with information on how to assert themselves when confronted with harassment. This campaign, therefore serves to address violence experienced in internet and cellular phones by raising awareness and disseminating information. This will be done through distribution of stickers, fact sheets, posters and outreach to schools, learners, parents and NGOs. For further information and document on the concept, please see the Women'sNet website (<http://www.womensnet.org.za/node/863>).

Girls'Net, as part of our "Keep your Chats Exactly That!" campaign, visited schools and discovered that many learners had been subject to bullying, sexual harassment and pornography.

Some learners were exposed to, and interacted with, pornographic materials. The learners either viewed pornography from family/friends/ relatives' phones or their own. They also reported viewing and sharing pornography they downloaded from the internet or received from their friends. Learners also reported sharing each other's naked pictures. In addition, young people reported constant bullying, stalking and harassment while using cell phones. In focus group interviews we conducted when investigating the use of social networks, girls reported that they withdrew from mobile social networks because of sexual harassment.

#### About Girls'Net:

Girls'Net (<http://www.womensnet.org.za/girlsnet>) is a South African social and multi-media programme that gets girls involved in the use of ICTs for their own development. Girls'Net recognizes the significance of ICTs in the lives of girls and in their potential for development.

However the project also acknowledges the dangers of ICTs where predators can use them as a platform and a tool to violate girls. We support capacity building, engagement and social activities to enable girls to harness the safe use of ICTs to realise their potential. Girls'Net is a project of Women'sNet.