HAVE YOU GOT YOUR MOJO?
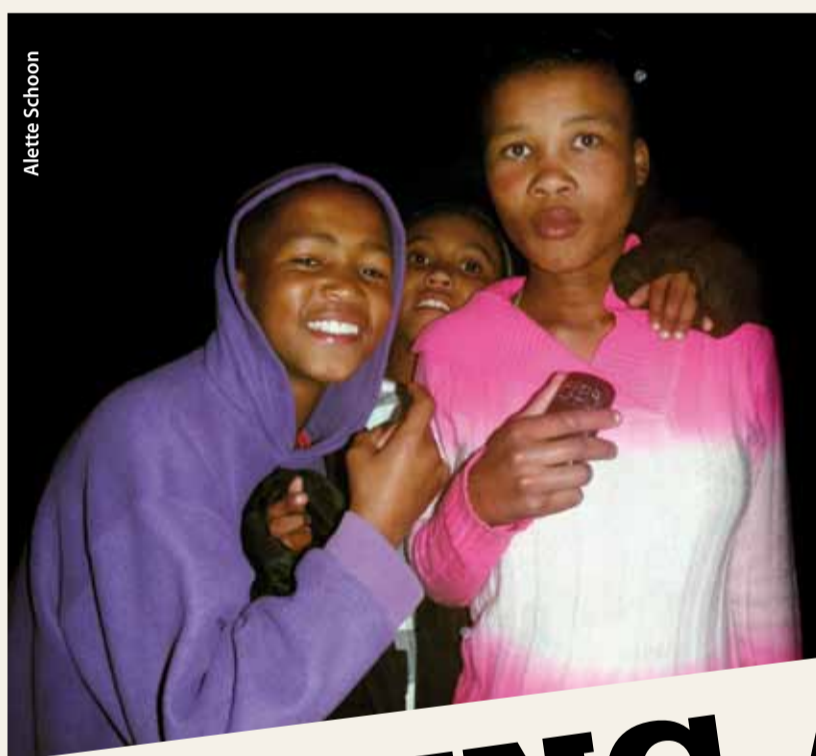

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It was dusk, and a group of young men with a dog trailing behind them, were walking past on a dusty township road in Hooggenoeg, an RDP village on the rim of the Grahamstown bowl. While they ambled along, one was holding up a mobile phone on which music was playing, dancing while he walked. This was exactly the kind of thing I was hoping to observe in my new identity as researcher and participant observer, and was why I had agreed to judge the Hooggenoeg fashion show which turned out to be more of a beauty competition. While I'm not generally fond of these kind of shows and the way they essentialise beauty, I agreed because I wanted to get more of a sense of how mobile phones are integrated into the everyday lives of these young adults.

The basis of my study is that information and communication technology needs to be understood contextually, and that its meaning is socially defined, just as it in turn transforms the social spaces it find itself in. This dialectical approach to technology and society is the basis of the "domestication approach", developed by media studies scholars Roger Silverstone, Eric Hirsch and David Morley. It was applied by anthropologist Daniel Miller to study the mobile phone in Jamaica, where he found the mobile phone was used very differently there – compared to patterns of use in developed countries – to express a particular Jamaican identity which prioritised social link-ups and music.

Back at the fashion show in Hooggenoeg, it was clear that music on mobile phones was an important part of expressing identity here too. Groups of young men would come to the front and dance elaborate routines to hip-hop tracks while the young women were changing their outfits in the kitchen. All these hip-hop tracks were saved on their phones, and I observed how one young man Bluetoothed a track to the DJ's computer, displaying his competence in the technology with discreet efficiency.

In my research interviews with young adults they described how they habitually download music and then share it with friends on street corners via Bluetooth. Their music collections become a way of expressing identity, and here in this township, in which apartheid race constructs of African and coloured had blurred, several of my interviewees used their music to express this.

Interviewer: So wat dink jy sê jou songs omtrent jou, watter soort mens jy is? [What do you think your songs say about you? What kind of person you are?]

Beronice: (laughs) Dat ek nie racism is nie. Ek hou van alles. [That I'm not racist. I like everything.]

The township of Hooggenoeg was built in 1995 as a social experiment by the municipality, who explicitly tried to counter the divisions of apartheid by allocating housing in equal percentages to coloured and African backyard and informal settlement dwellers. Several of the young people I spoke to changed their racial identity depending on the company they were with, and expressed discomfort that they had to choose between coloured and African on job application forms. Instead, they called themselves "Mix" and switched easily between Afrikaans and isiXhosa.

They code-switched between languages when talking to friends on MXit too, which often intrigued those living elsewhere, who wanted to know more about "living the life of two cultures". Here it was common for young men whose parents would describe themselves as coloured to participate in Xhosa circumcision ceremonies, or as they say in Hooggenoeg: "Almal kan mos nou bos toe gaan om 'n boeta te word". [Everyone can go to the bush to become a brother]

A much more important division in this community is class. Here a young person who tries to claim some status, but does not have a phone, is mocked. Class determines one's phone, as only those with access to credit can buy phones with special features. Young adults who had phones that were incapable of playing media or accessing the internet were acutely aware of this deficiency, and would describe their phones as not being "real phones". Here a mobile phone is synonymous with a portable media device. In fact, as I took photographs of the fashion show with a digital camera, several young people asked me what type of phone I was using.

From my chair in the front with the judges I observed an intriguing ritual, where a young woman in the audience coyly passed her phone along to a chuffed young man whose friend took his photograph and then passed the phone back to her. According to the other young adults this was a common flirtation ritual, and handing your phone to someone you liked, for a photo or a MXit contact, was common.

This gesture of entrusting a romantic interest with one's most valuable possession, leant a sensual haptic quality to mobile phone flirtation. Posing has become an everyday township practice, and young people could spend great effort in dressing up in a particular style – hip-hop or Italian in a suit – and posing for a

HAVING A PHONE HAVING *style...*

photo, in order to have the right wallpaper image.

The wallpaper photo on a young adult's mobile phone is not only an expression of identity, but also a very important security feature. If they locked a phone with a security code, the face would remain to mark the phone as theirs. One young woman had actually had her phone returned to her after the thieves were unable to unlock it. Most of these thefts happen on the border of Hooggenoeg where one has to pick a shortcut through the bushes.

Young women negotiate this dangerous journey with a please-call-me to get a friend to meet them halfway. One young man chose a phone with a good torch in order to navigate the bushes at night. As some little girls had been raped in these bushes, one of the young women now used Google on her phone to find information for her little sister's school projects so that she didn't have to negotiate the journey to the library.

On the dusty streets of Hooggenoeg it is relatively safe however, and here young men walk a ritual walk in the evening, snaking through all 11 roads, briefly stopping to meet with others on the corners or flirt with girls in front of their gates.

It's an opportunity to be seen and recognised, a social walk akin to the Italian *passegiata*. The mobile phone is integral to this walk, and young men not only use it to provide a soundtrack, but also to engage in constant conversation over MXit with friends in other parts of town while they walked, a practice which the Japanese refer to as an "augmented flesh meet".

Sometimes they chatted to those who were right in front of them. Danny, the self-confessed bad boy, would use MXit to encourage young women to leave the safety of their gates and walk halfway towards him down the street, or go "fifty-fifty". He seemed to take pride in initiating young women into the world of sexual relationships, and described how he used MXit as a way of engaging a shy young woman on a first date.

Danny: So I had to remain on MXit, 'cause she wanted to remain on MXit, because she wanted to sit with us, but she was too shy, because like all the girls are there, like, and she was too shy to, like, talk to me, communicate face to face, she wanted to communicate over MXit while she's sitting over there and I'm here. And so it was like: "I'm OK with that", 'cause most of them do that.

Here MXit helped to create a parallel private booth for the flirtation. The young men were adamant that their phones were their only privacy, and that otherwise privacy was impossible here as everyone here knew everyone, and gossip on MXit and gossip site Outoilet made all one's actions visible.

This concept of the phone as private means that it is common for young men to store their home-made pornography on their phones. Young women, on the other hand, were acutely aware that their phones were not private, as they faced regular phone inspections by their boyfriends, where the double standards of sexual propriety were applied. This meant that a young woman preferred storing photos online on MXit, and that she engaged in a range of stealth tactics to avoid detection of other romantic interests, such as entering the names of a female friend when saving such a name on her phone.

What moved me most in this study, was how one young illiterate woman had been inspired to go to a literacy class so that she too would be able to write an sms. According to the other young women there were many who had dropped out of primary school who were now being taught by others how to write so they could use MXit.

Here the mobile phone is providing a key role in improving literacy, even if it is just learning to write in sms-style abbreviations. One young woman I interviewed used her phone to write love poems that she forwarded to friends.

The phone as creative device was also evident in the hip-hop musician who saved his tracks on his phone, and the young man who used his phone to film a satirical news report to impress his friends. Others manipulated photographs and added captions through a phone application.

As a media device, the mobile phone in this community is a way for young people to not only express who they are through consuming particular media, but for producing their own media through a range of techniques, to craft these identities. Here the mobile phone has become a device that has meaning in relation to the local context, and the tensions of race, class, gender and personal safety that define this very particular, but also typically South African, space.