MOBILE LITERACIES & SOUTH AFRICAN TEENS:

Leisure reading, writing, and MXit chatting for teens in Langa and Guguletu.

Report prepared for the Shuttleworth Foundation by
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Research developed and conducted for the m4Lit project, in collaboration with Steve Vosloo (Shuttleworth Foundation) and Ana Deumert (University of Cape Town).
Why ... does literacy so often flourish out of school?
(Hull and Schultz, 2002:2)
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

What happens when an m-novel (a novel intended to be read on cell phones), a mobile website and an online social network are used to support South African teens' leisure reading and writing?

The Shuttleworth Foundation’s m4Lit project commissioned an m-novel, entitled Kontax, which was written by Sam Wilson and translated into isiXhosa by Nkululeko Mabandla. Written in the teen mystery genre, Kontax was targeted at teens aged between fourteen and seventeen years and was initially published in daily episodes in both English and isiXhosa on the mobisite www.kontax.mobi (a website designed specifically for use on mobile phones). It was later also released on local mobile social network and instant messaging platform, MXit.

The m4Lit research project investigated how South African teens responded to Kontax, and how compatible the m-novel was with teens’ existing mobile literacy practices. The m4Lit research project focused on exploring an apparent paradox of literacy in South Africa. In most of the country’s under-performing schools, a majority of teens are left behind academically, many experience difficulties with literacy instruction and most have limited access to books and computers. Yet, as a result of South Africa’s mobile phone ‘revolution’ and a thriving mobile youth culture, outside school teens increasingly enjoy frequent rich interactions with the written word and with digital technologies in their peer networks. The m4Lit project asked whether South African teens’ enthusiasm about text on phones and their widespread access to mobile Internet could be used in a literacy development project which attempted to bridge the gap between in-school and out-of-school literacies, via leisure reading and writing of fiction.

A group of isiXhosa-speaking teens (ages 14-17) from Langa and Guguletu were recruited as m4Lit participants. Mobile internet access is pervasive in many South African urban areas, even for economically and educationally marginalized teens (Kreutzer, 2009), such as those who participated in this study. All participants were required to have some form of mobile internet access (either via their own phone or via shared phones). The research project investigated whether these teens accessed the m-novel via their phones and whether reading a mobile novel online fitted in with their existing mobile literacy practices. Two surveys (n=61 and n=50), two focus groups (n=10), and usability evaluations (n=8) were conducted. Data from the MXit campaign and from the Kontax mobisite were also analysed to gain insights into the responses of a broader audience.
Kontax m-novel - Audience impact and engagement

Kontax generated substantial interest from South African teens from around the country. Approximately 28 000 young people (in the age group 11-18) signed up to read the m-novel on their phones (via MXit) over the month of the Kontax campaign. Around 27 000 MXit users from a slightly older age bracket (ages 19-25) also signed up, suggesting that the m-novel appealed to many older youth and young adults as well. Subscriber numbers for Kontax (at least 63 310 subscribers in total) are sizable when compared to the small local audiences for conventional book publishing (even successful South African titles sell only around 5 000 copies). Even when compared to the 100 000 subscribers who signed up on MXit to receive content from popular commercial brands such as X-Box, Kontax gained a substantial number of MXit subscribers.

Levels of interest in the isiXhosa version of Kontax were encouraging, particularly given the context of South Africa’s monolingual and English-dominant approaches to literacy in high schools, libraries and in publishing (cf. Deumert, 2010).

Most Kontax subscribers came from the highly urbanised provinces of Gauteng (69%) and the Western Cape (16%), while the more rural provinces were massively under-represented, possibly reflecting the geographical distribution of MXit use and mobile internet. More females (54%) than males (46%) subscribed to Kontax, a gender distribution which differs significantly from MXit’s overall male majority (57%) (P= 0.009). While the m-novel interested both male and female subscribers, females may thus have been particularly attracted to the opportunity to read mobile fiction. There is still room for growth, since Kontax’s subscriber figures represent only 2% of MXit’s reported 3 380 000 registered users in the targeted age groups.

Exact readership figures are not available for MXit, but page views data allow us to estimate that about 46% of Kontax’s approximately 28 000 subscribers in the age group 11-18 years (about 12 600) read at least the first two chapters of the Kontax story. Just under 7 200 (26%) of Kontax subscribers from this age group were sufficiently engaged by the story to read the entire series of 21 chapters.

The overall reported uptake of Kontax was relatively high among m4Lit survey participants (66.7%), but only a small number persisted in more sustained reading of Kontax, with 10.4% (n=5) reading all the chapters. The m4Lit campaign thus appears to have been successful in using the accessibility and novelty of mobile phone fiction to spark interest in Kontax, while it only ‘hooked’ a minority of more committed readers.

This readership pattern was consistent across the mobisite, the MXit portal and in the survey answers from the m4Lit participants. A wider variety of genres and languages might have engaged more
potential readers, and different formats could perhaps have accommodated a range of reading styles and encouraged more readers to complete the story.

The choice of the MXit platform was crucial to achieving broad uptake of Kontax among teens. In comparison to the MXit portal, the Kontax mobisite attracted a far smaller number of users (there were about 3000 attempts to register on the site, mostly unsuccessful). Only 207 users completed the registration process successfully, while a small group of active users (67) commented and created profiles on the mobisite. Usability testing revealed that some teens had severe difficulties with the web interface on the mobisite, particularly when trying to register. They explained that they preferred the MXit interface because of the lack of barriers to participation, its more familiar interactional idiom (IM-based rather than web-based) and because it allowed them to integrate reading Kontax with their usual multitasking. In this way, they could move easily between reading the m-novel and their multiple simultaneous chats and instant messaging sessions on MXit. In contrast, reading Kontax on the mobisite interfered with teens’ usual social activities, since it required them to close down the MXit client, thus cutting off the connection with their friends and online contacts.

Nonetheless a group of engaged Kontax ‘fans’ used the mobisite to connect with other readers, comment on the story, and write their own stories. The social network features of the mobisite allowed a vibrant affinity space to develop around the story as it unfolded on the mobisite. In contrast, MXit was not a successful platform to engage teens as writers. Although over 2 000 entries were submitted via MXit in a Kontax sequel competition, MXit was not used to develop a platform for teens’ writing or to allow them a Web2.0 style of interaction with an audience of peers in the way the m4Lit project had initially envisaged.

Mobile literacies

The uptake of Kontax was limited in comparison to the popularity of instant messaging - MXit reports that their users send 250 million messages per day. Thus, while the m4Lit project successfully leveraged the mobile platform for literacy development, it also revealed the distance between: first, the school-based literacy practices associated with reading a novel; second, the somewhat distant ‘Web2.0’ participatory practices of the global digerati, and third, the more familiar mobile literacies which are central to teen social interaction in South Africa. Teens’ mobile literacies and the extent of their familiarity with computers were explored in the m4Lit surveys, focus groups, and usability observations.

The m4Lit participants from Langa and Guguletu barely used computers for writing, and only 18% had a computer at home. Outside school, they wrote on a mobile phone, or else, in only a minority of cases, on pen and paper. MXit use was pervasive (75% had used it the previous day). Although
they used the web on both computers and phones, their daily web use was significantly more likely to take place on a phone than on a computer ($P=0.002$), indicating the greater accessibility of mobile internet to them. Beyond this improved accessibility, having a web-enabled phone did not appear to expand the range of daily opportunities for web use for this group. When compared to their desktop internet use, the teens’ use of the mobile internet was not associated with a significantly increased likelihood of engaging in multiple different online activities on any particular day.

Teens’ mobile-centric web use focused on search (Google), social networking on Facebook, and a ‘delinked’ mode of interacting with media driven by downloading, saving and sharing media via Bluetooth, rather than ‘surfing’ or browsing media online. In comparison to earlier studies (Kreutzer, 2009), Facebook appeared to be gaining ground. Among the m4Lit survey participants, 37.7% reported that they had used Facebook on the previous day. Teens were significantly more likely to access news and Facebook on their phones than on their PCs ‘yesterday’ (Facebook $P=0.01$; News $P=0.006$). Educational uses of the web to find information for school were significantly more likely to take place on computers than on phones ($P=0.00001$) with 59% of surveyed teens using computers and 38% using phones to research information for school ($N=61$). Educational web use was infrequent on both phones and computers, and few participants mentioned doing school research on the previous day (16% on both phones and computers). This suggests that schools and teachers as well as teens have been relatively slow to make use of this new platform for reading, writing and research. This reluctance is partially explained by MXit’s current cultural resonances, its associations with teen sexuality and romance, and its lack of cross-generational social networks.

**Designing new networks and learning new rules**

The m4Lit participants used MXit to design extensive social networks which strengthened ties with their close friends and developed new ties in their peer group, but which in all cases entirely excluded their parents. MXit social networks seem to allow both the ongoing maintenance of existing intimate relationships associated with cellphone communication, and the more casual and often pseudonymous networking associated with websites and chatrooms, where teens get to know a range of online contacts. Many participants used MXit to make new contacts, and their interactions were often flirtatious, romantic or sexual in character. While some teens cast a broad net looking for new contacts, most explored existing school or neighbourhood networks.

MXit use has given rise to an explosion of written interaction, and this may be having a range of influences on teen literacies, influences which are not all as negative or destructive as media accounts tend to suggest. The sheer quantity of written interaction taking place on mobile phones suggests that teens may be developing a heightened awareness of and comfort with written expression. Focus groups suggested that teens gain pleasure from developing their command of
mobile social interactions and from play with written language, as well as experiencing intense anxieties about how their writing and general competence is perceived by their peers.

Teens talked about being plunged into an initially unfamiliar alternative language regime on MXit, but that they soon learned to conform to new sets of interactional rules -- rules which go beyond textisms and non-standard orthographies. In addition to learning the correctly abbreviated orthography for MXit chat (‘uyi-shortnishe’) which was valued because it helped to maintain a suitably responsive style of interaction, mobile literacies unique to MXit involved learning to manage an interactional repertoire associated with inviting new contacts (uku-invayitha), monitoring existing contacts, and deleting unwanted contacts, (uku-dilitha). Social erasure was thus the fate of contacts deleted for a range of reasons – perhaps because they were awkwardly slow in their responses, they revealed themselves as gauche newcomers to MXit, their pictures were not attractive enough, or because they were overly aggressive, or problematic for some other reason.

Teens needed to learn to identify and manage ‘flaming’ or online aggressive behavior along with the potential threat presented by interacting with anonymous contacts. This was given an additional urgency because of their awareness that the online taunts or tricks of ‘abarongo’ (bad or ‘wrong’ contacts) who might live around the corner or go to the same school could lead to more serious consequences than verbally aggressive text messages.

Primarily though, teens using MXit learned to recognize and participate in genres of romantic talk and sexual play, and some of their most enjoyable or fulfilling interactions on MXit were associated with finding a new romantic partner, or experiencing the growth of a deep and mutual connection in an intricate dance of online and offline intimacy. Here they also learned to negotiate the quid pro quo of transactional interactions, such as photograph exchanges, which are not always mutual. Teens reported that careful footwork was required to get contacts to send them pictures without revealing their own appearance (and thus risking rejection or identification). In some genres, female teens sometimes played the role of gatekeepers of romantic and sexual interaction in a decidedly transactional way, with airtime, chocolates and other gifts viewed as suitable exchanges for their attention on MXit.

Overall, mobile literacies associated with mobile internet (MXit) develop as teens gain expertise in written conversational genres (rather than the fictional or expository genres associated with writing and reading in school). A key aspect of teens’ competence in mobile literacy appeared to involve the ability to manage how much personal information was revealed in profile pictures and login names or MXit handles. They also learned to distribute attention across chats within MXit, to juggle MXit use and other social and academic obligations, and to respond to adults’ attempts to regulate
MXit use, whether at home, at school, or through the architecture of the mobile applications themselves.

While conforming to and sometimes rebelling against regulation, teens also formulated their own personal rules and strategies for managing MXit use, most often by trying to limit the amount of time they spent on MXit, by deleting the application from their phone during the exam period, and also by limiting the range of interactions in which they were prepared to engage with strangers. They admitted that these attempts were not always successful – in a contest of ‘Book vs. Phone’, the phone often won hands down. A large majority (76%) reported that they had experienced conflict with their parents because of their cellphone or MXit use, most often because of late nights, neglected schoolwork, or uncompleted household chores.

**Conclusion**

The m4Lit project has shown one way in which the ‘book vs phone’ contest might be resolved. The success of Kontax in reaching substantial teen audiences suggests that even the distance between teen mobile literacies and school literacies might be bridged to some extent for urban teens through the provision of mobile-accessible texts. Mobile technology is not a quick fix, and the m4Lit project has shown how that literacy development involves nurturing communities of practice and fostering affinity spaces where out-of-school and leisure reading and writing are encouraged. Moreover, a real link to school would introduce additional challenges of creating links between informal learning in affinity spaces, curriculum and pedagogy. Nonetheless, mobile literacies are often distant from or oppositional to school literacies. A certain level of conflict between the two appears to be inevitable, given the current nature of schools as socially conservative institutions and the association of phones with an often transgressive youth culture. Experience in chatting is unlikely to help teens produce written academic genres, or to qualify them for middle class jobs and careers. These areas where differential access to literacy is used for social gatekeeping will remain issues of abiding concern for literacy development.

Other bridges also need to be built. Mobile literacies require new communicative competencies, and the textual forms associated with mobile communication should not be viewed as evidence of linguistic decline or incompetence. School literacy curricula could benefit by broadening their focus and attending to the dialogic written genres which many teens already command, such as those associated with IM. Schools’ traditional focus has been the study of fixed texts such as novels, poems and reports, but current social practices suggest that literacy curricula also start to address a range of text-based conversational genres. This shift could be motivated by the important roles mobile literacies play for teens and by the ways they may be preparing teens for adult life and the need to participate in and leverage social networks. Thus mobile literacies provide ways for teens to
reconfigure their existing surroundings, by making new social connections, by deepening existing contacts, and by connecting with the expressive resources and pleasures of global youth culture.

The accessibility and affordability of mobile internet and the lack of availability of PCs means that South African teens’ mobile literacies outstrip those of adults and of many of their peers in more well-resourced contexts. That said, digital literacies are not a single ‘ladder’, and in the South African context many teens’ mobile-centric internet use currently focuses on MXit, overshadowing their use of the web. This raises questions about digital inclusion for mobile-centric internet users in South Africa, since web resources are configured differently to MXit, and their use often involves a different set of elite literacy practices to which teens are not currently being apprenticed. In particular, teens’ experience of online creativity and participation in web publishing is limited by this particular trajectory of access, as MXit does not promote user generated content through blogging, podcasting, or photo sharing. Owing to MXit’s dominance of the local mobile space, mobile-centric teens’ understanding of web conventions and their sense of themselves as web authors may well be lagging behind that of other teens, both globally and in comparison to their wealthier peers in South Africa.

Understanding teen mobile literacies and their social significance will allow South African teachers and curriculum developers to attend to the social and linguistic resources which mobile phone use has already helped students to develop. Bringing these practices into the classroom and into the curriculum for academic scrutiny and discussion could give teens a meta-language to articulate and develop their existing often tacit knowledge of mobile communicative strategies and practices. It may also help to identify those digital literacies and participation practices to which mobile-centric teens do not currently have much access, but which play an important role in digital inclusion.

Future challenges involving teen mobile literacies would include developing new interfaces to support multilingualism, providing teens with spaces for publishing their own writing, fostering more open mobile social networks, and paying very careful attention to who is still excluded from the mobile internet space.
1. M4Lit = Mobiles for literacy

Mobile literacies and South African teens

2. Literacy goes mobile?

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Mobile communication and the New Literacy Studies
Young South Africans and literacy, in and out of school
New literacies and online participation in the global north
Social support and mobile networks in marginal contexts

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Social networks - Peers as audience and intermediaries
Familiarity with the mobile web
Mobile discourse and mobisite lexical profiles

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Kontax marketing - Splash screens and Tradepost messages
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The Shuttleworth Foundation’s m4Lit project (mobiles for literacy) aimed to explore how mobile media, a mobile website (mobisite) and online social network could support South African teens’ leisure reading and writing of fiction. A teen m-novel (a novel written to be read on mobile phones), entitled Kontax, was commissioned by the Foundation, written by Sam Wilson and translated into isiXhosa by Nkululeko Mabandla. Kontax was published both on a mobisite (www.kontax.mobi) and on MXit (a popular local mobile instant messaging application used by many South African teens).

The Kontax story was published serially, with a new episode released every day. Readers were invited to interact with it as the story unfolded – they voted on and discussed the plot, left comments, and also submitted their own writing in a competition to plan the sequel to the story.

This report focuses on how research into the m4 Lit project can contribute to the understanding of South African teens’ mobile literacies, from a New Literacy Studies perspective. Many researchers have studied youth and digital literacy, but these studies often focus on the activities of teens using computers in the relatively affluent countries of the global north. In contrast, little is known about the digital literacies of the majority of the world’s teens, who increasingly use digital media and engage in digital reading and writing on mobile phones, while they may not use computers very regularly, or indeed at all.

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1 The m4Lit project was funded by the Shuttleworth Foundation, South Africa, and we are grateful for this support. The m4Lit research was planned and conceptualised in close collaboration with Steve Vosloo and Ana Deumert. Nkululeko Mabandla played a crucial role as project co-ordinator, translator, and interpreter, and also conducted the focus groups discussed in Chapter 5. Fieldworkers Andile, Khosi, Thabiso, Yandiswa, and Ziphlelele conducted the first and second surveys discussed in Chapter 4, and their insightful feedback on the questions helped us to improve the design of our questionnaires. We also owe a debt of gratitude to the teenagers from Langa and Guguletu who participated in this study and gave us a great deal of their time, despite having many other more interesting activities on their agenda. Access to the MXit platform was provided as a Corporate Social Responsibility project by MXit Lifestyle. Mike Carter, Shauna Fulford, and Laura Hallam from MXit Lifestyle, gave us access to MXit data from the Kontax campaign, and were extremely helpful in answering all our many questions about it. Prior research into teens and mobile communication in Cape Town by Tino Kreutzer (Kreutzer, 2009) made an important contribution to the planning and conceptualisation of the research, as did conversations and discussions with Mastin Prinsloo. In particular, several questions from Tino’s Generation Mobile survey were included in the first m4Lit survey.

2 A more detailed initial project description is available in Vosloo, Walton, and Deumert, 2009, while the project itself, uptake of the m-novel in English and isiXhosa, and multilingual participation by visitors to the mobisite are discussed in Vosloo (2010) and Deumert (2010).
The premises for m4Lit were the following: First, internet-enabled mobile phones are already central to the many informal literacy activities of youth culture, particularly those associated with short message service (SMS) and instant messaging (IM). Second, such phones can potentially play a significant role in distribution of reading material (whether for formal education or for leisure), and can give young people in developing countries access to otherwise inaccessible reading material.

To investigate these premises, the m4Lit project had a research component which included two surveys (n=61 and n=50), two focus groups (n=10), and usability evaluations (n=8). These methods were used to assess firstly, the extent to which the targeted group of isiXhosa-speaking South African teens (age 14-17) accessed the m-novel via their phones (see Deumert, 2010 and Vosloo, 2010) and secondly, to investigate whether reading a mobile novel online was compatible with teens’ overall existing mobile literacy practices. This document reports the extent to which teen audiences engaged with the Kontax campaign, and documents how the surveyed teens used literacy in their predominant form of mobile communication (mobile instant messaging on MXit), and their experiences of the mobile web and the Kontax mobisite.

### Mobile Literacies and South African Teens

Studies of children’s ‘new literacies’ in the global north have yet to consider the distinct features of literacy associated with mobile phone use for the majority of the world. Scholars who investigate ‘digital literacy’ have tended to assume that all young people have (or should have) access to computers, and that ‘new literacies’ develop primarily through children’s extensive out-of-school experience in using computers to access the Internet, digital media, and games (e.g. Snyder, 1998, Gee, 2003, Coiro, Knobel, Lankshear and Leu, 2008). For example, mobile phones are discussed in only 4 of the 1315 pages of the mammoth Handbook of Research on New Literacies, while its case study of mobile learning focuses on an atypical experiment in mobile gaming with a PDA (Coiro et al., 2008). This is an important gap if we consider the extent of contemporary global mobile phone use and also levels of concern in the media (Thurlow, 2006) about how text messaging deviates from standard usage, particularly popular claims of its supposedly deleterious effect on literacy and language use.

While there is widespread public consensus that those without computers and the Internet are stranded without a universally desirable technology, left behind on the other side of the ‘digital divide’, innovative uses of mobile technology are not always viewed as positively, particularly when they do not follow the North American or European model (Ito, 2006:6). Unlike computer skills, the digital literacies associated with mobile phone use are not considered generally desirable or necessary. Instead, if such mobile communication practices are not seen as harmful, they are seen as part of a contemporary trend in literate communication that may be ‘sacrificing thoughtfulness for immediacy’ (Baron, 2008:198). As Ito points out, the relatively slow adoption of mobile...
communication in the United States meant that skills in mobile communication tended to be regarded as culturally specific preferences, or as exotic peculiarities (Ito, 2006) rather than as essential "mobile literacies".

Seen differently, mobile phones have entrenched new uses for literacy, notably the reading and writing practices associated with texting (cf. Thurlow and Pof, 2009) in interpersonal genres of interaction, but also the extensive uses of writing in mobile internet applications. In her studies of mobile phone use in Japan, Ito identifies a handheld mode of mobile communication as ubiquitous ‘lightweight engagement’ which contrasts with desktop-style ‘complex functionality and stationary immersive engagement’ (Ito 2006: 6).

Thus texting and mobile internet use in Japan exemplify how the ‘digital literacies’ usually associated with computers do not characterise all digital communication. The relationships between local and global in digital literacy practices in other contexts are equally complex (Snyder and Prinsloo, 2007; Donner, 2007). In African countries, for example, these new mobile uses of literacy are particularly important for low income communities, since literacy now provides access to SMS, a powerful mode of interpersonal communication, often more affordable than voice telephony.

South African mobile phone use reached 90.16 mobile phone subscriptions per 100 people in 2008 (ITU, 2009). Popular language and literacy practices are adapting to mobile use, inflected both by global standards and local linguistic features and cultural content (Deumert and Masinyana, 2008, Deumert, Klein and Masinyana, 2008). Even Internet use has a local, and mobile accent. In the urban townships of South Africa, growing numbers of people, particularly young people, are accessing digital media and the Internet via their mobile phones (Donner and Gitau, 2009, Kreutzer, 2009).

One of the factors driving this shift to mobile Internet is a low cost mobile IM application known as MXit. MXit allows users to send one-to-one IM text messages to one another and only pay for the cost of the data. It also provides small chatrooms where users pay 1-2 cents per message. This is a substantial saving on the cost of regular SMS text messages, which usually cost about 80 cents per message. Thus text communication is far more affordable via MXit - if users buy data bundles, they can get 1MB of data for the cost of 2-3 SMSes. According to a company representative, MXit has 16 891 834 registered users in total, of whom 1 954 041 are from abroad, and 14 937 793 are in South Africa. Of these, 21% are between 15-18 years and 49% are between 19-25 (Mike Carter, 2010,
Internet access is thus primarily associated with IM as a variant of texting, and MXit reports that its users send one another 250 million messages per day.

The popularity of MXit and its rapid diffusion among South African teens was initially accompanied by a froth of media panic (Chigona and Chigona, 2009) about its potentially harmful effects. Despite negative media coverage, both parents and youth argue for the use of MXit -- young people value MXit's role in configuring, maintaining and strengthening their social networks, while parents point to its economic advantages as a cheap mode of communication (Chigona, Chigona, Ngqokelela, and Mpofu, 2009). Bosch found that South African teens’ MXit use shows many commonalities with adolescent uses of cellphones around the world, and she identified the role played by MXit in youth emancipation from family constraints, and its central role in constructing local teen identities – both in relation to gender and race in the South African context (Bosch, 2008). Other scholars home in on the potential of MXit for facilitating cheaper and accessible messaging for development communication (Chigona, Beukes, Vally and Tanner, 2009), community empowerment (Parker and Wills, 2009) and m-learning (Ford and Botha, 2007, 2009). Thus there are severe discrepancies between the negative press for MXit and the enthusiasm of teenaged users and academic researchers alike.

This research project attempts to characterise the mobile literacies among 14-17 year old residents of Langa and Guguletu, and to compare these to the ‘digital literacies’ found in wealthier contexts. It documents out-of-school digital and mobile literacy practices reported by the urban teens who participated in the m4Lit surveys and focus groups, and also describes digital literacies observed as teens participated in the online community of readers created through the Kontax mobisite.

Broadly, the project aimed to investigate the following aspects of teens’ use of mobile literacies:

- Access to ICT and involvement in digital literacy practices associated with mobile Internet
- Teen social networking and experiences of mobile conversational genres.
- Familiarity with the mobile web
- Lexical profiles of discourse posted to the Kontax website

2. Literacy Goes Mobile?

Chapter 2 establishes a framework for the research and asking what ‘mobile literacy’ might mean, from a New Literacy Studies perspective, by reviewing a global body of research into digital literacies and youth mobile phone use.

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3 MXit’s user figures are not open to scrutiny, and hence such claims should be treated with a certain amount of caution. In particular, the available figures do not indicate how regularly users log into the application.
3. M4Lit Research Project
In Chapter 3, the teenaged participants in the M4Lit research project are introduced, the aims of the project are outlined in more detail, and the research methodologies used to generate data are described - surveys, focus groups, usability observations, and online content analysis.

4. Audience Impact and Engagement
The overall data from the MXit campaign and the Kontax mobisite are presented in a discussion of the demographics of Kontax subscribers and readership, and the nature of audience engagement with the campaign and the story.

5. m4Lit Teens - Leisure Information and Communication Technology use
In Chapter 4, the findings of both the m4Lit surveys are discussed, in so far as they reveal the ways in which urban isiXhosa-speaking teens in Cape Town townships are using ICTs, with a particular focus on their current dominant forms of communication - mobile Internet, social networking and their use of instant messaging platform, MXit.

6. Designing social interfaces
Chapter 5 reports the findings of the m4Lit focus groups, exploring how male and female teens discussed their own use of MXit, and documenting their experiences of mobile communication, social networking, literacy and language use.

7. Mobisite design and discourse
Chapter 6 is an analysis of the discourse posted in English to the Kontax website by teens in the agegroup 14-17. The language use of participants is analysed using automated lexical profiling which focuses on their use of codeswitching and textisms (or ‘textspk’, known as ‘MXit language’ in South Africa).
2. LITERACY GOES MOBILE?

How do technologies for writing and reading (such as cellphones or computers) relate to ‘literacy’, and what rhetorical strategies are served by talk about ‘mobile literacies’?

Too often, terms such as ‘computer literacy’ and ‘mobile literacy’ simply lump a technology together with the word ‘literacy’, without further reflection on the connection between the two terms. For example, in South African educational talk, students are not simply expected to learn how to use computers, they are expected to develop ‘technological literacy’. As in this example, the word ‘literacy’ is used loosely to describe a competence or skill, which gains higher status by virtue of an analogy with books, reading, and authorship. Phrases such as ‘computer literacy’ or ‘digital literacy’ equate the use of digital media, software, computers, networks and other technologies with the ability to read and write. Such usage, by implication, sets technology users apart, ensconced in the ranks of the ‘literate’, in an implicit contrast with the ‘illiterate’.

In yet another, Freireian sense of the word ‘literacy’, literacy or ‘reading the word’ is a critical ability which reciprocally entails ‘reading the world’ (Freire & Macedo, 1987). This critical approach to literacy has an explicit political agenda which situates reading and writing as part of a process of questioning and social activism. For example, when HIV positive citizens took to the streets in South Africa demanding their rights to healthcare and anti-retrovirals, their stance was referred to as ‘treatment literacy’. When knowledge of technology is described as ‘literacy’ in this way, it is not only seen as a basic requirement for participation and inclusion in modern society (Sefton-Green, 2006:291), but also as a prerequisite for agency, and thus an important democratic right to which all are entitled.

Some of the brightest colours in literacy’s positive aura are there because literacy is believed to bring about substantial changes in an individual’s cognitive capacities. According to this (now discredited) view, literacy itself transforms cognition, changing the ability to think abstractly, to categorize, and to present certain kinds of verbal explanations. The view persists, despite the fact that many of the changes associated with literacy are more likely to be associated with years of schooling, rather than with the ability to read and write. Where the influence of schooling can be studied separately from the effects of reading and writing, many cognitive changes appear to result from the types of activities common in school rather than from literacy per se (Scribner and Cole, 1981). Associated positive connotations of the word ‘literacy’ stem from the fact that literacy is seen as a transformative kind of learning, since it allows individuals to deal with new contexts, in that the
knowledge of the ‘codes’ of alphabetic writing allow individuals to sound out, recognise and spell written words. By analogy with this, ‘new literacies’ refer to the ability to interpret and produce multimodal texts, which include images and sound as well as writing. As media scholar David Buckingham comments, there is currently a ‘fashionable proliferation’ of such new literacies (2007:147) with communication literature overflowing with references to visual literacy, media literacy, digital literacy, and multiliteracies. Other discussions appropriate the term ‘literacy’ to describe the abilities associated with learning to play computer and video games (e.g. Gee, 2003). This is a strategy to ‘normalize a proscribed cultural activity’ (since games are often seen as a threat to literacy) and simultaneously critique existing (too narrow) definitions of literacy (Sefton-Green, 2006:291).

As in the case of literacy more narrowly defined, transfer of interpretive skills to new situations (such as the ability to ‘read’ images or play games) is not necessarily automatic. The difficulty of transferring interpretative knowledge between situations is in fact also a limitation of literacy. While a literate person can ‘spell out’ complex technical words, or words in another language, this does not mean that he or she understands what those words mean – that requires participation in communities where those words are in use. Similarly the interpretative capacities associated with other ‘new literacies’ do not automatically transfer from one situation to another (Sefton-Green, 2006:300).

In another and less positive sense of the word, ‘literacy’ is seen as a restricted form of knowhow, perhaps not considered on a par with academic knowledge, but nonetheless necessary to get by. For example, South African students who are unlikely to pass mathematics are encouraged to take a simpler subject known as ‘mathematical literacy’. Students taking courses labelled ‘literacy’ are often there on a ‘need to know basis’, with limited access to more fundamental details such as the internal functioning of hardware and software, or of formal mathematics. While such forms of literacy training aim to allow students to use numbers and computers to solve everyday problems, they will not necessarily help them to participate in academic disciplines such as mathematics or computer programming.

**Sign-making, message production and dissemination**

This study refers to ‘mobile literacies’ as a shorthand for the knowledge and experience of written repertoires, genres, social events, and practices brought about as communication takes place via mobile phones between networked people in a range of social contexts around the world. This definition encompasses knowledge of the semiotic resource of writing, but also acknowledges that writing is inextricably interwoven with social knowledge – writing is governed by and responsive to different social contexts, registers and meanings.
Catchphrases such as ‘technological literacy’ or ‘mobile literacy’ have been criticised for stretching the meanings of the word ‘literacy’ far beyond its original reference to the use of letters to create signs, or semiotic messages and extending it to cover skills associated with the production or distribution of messages (Kress, 2003:23).

In the light of this critique, at minimum, ‘mobile literacy’ involves the knowledge of one or more written languages as semiotic systems, in particular of the specific variants of written communication associated with SMS and IM on mobile phones. Since textisms are often a ‘written acknowledgement of speech’ (Plester, Wood & Joshi, 2009:158) that mimics the pronunciation of non-standard spoken forms (e.g. ‘adaz’ = ‘others, or ‘vewi’ = ‘very’), mobile literacy also involves the knowledge of these spoken language variants or dialects.

Production skills, such as the use of phone keypads and messaging interfaces to produce writing on mobile phones, and distribution skills, such as knowing how to send a message via SMS, MXit or Twitter, are also necessary for mobile communication, although their role is different to the alphabetical knowledge of writing. These mobile production and distribution skills are the equivalent of the ability to use desktop publishing software or knowledge of the postal system.

From an anthropological perspective, there is more to literacy than the ability to assemble a message and to master its means of production and distribution. In addition to knowing techniques of writing and reading, people know how to use them appropriately, critically, creatively or transgressively in particular social contexts. This is the contribution of the New Literacy Studies.

**Mobile communication and the New Literacy Studies**

From the perspective of the New Literacy Studies, which studies how literacy is used across different societies, literacy involves more than just knowing how to read and write a specific script or alphabet, but also involves social practices that are given meanings within specific contexts, and which are used to establish power relations and identities in those contexts (cf. Street, 1993; Barton and Hamilton, 1998, Hull and Schultz, 2001:583-4).

For example, on the web, terms such as ‘comment’, ‘login’, ‘friend’ and ‘profile’ have all developed specific meanings. People do not learn these meanings by checking a dictionary, but by participating in social networks and online communities, and by engaging in the literacy events and practices which web users have developed.

**Literacy events**

As literacy is a form of social interaction, New Literacy Studies focuses on ‘literacy events’, or the particular social events in which writing is used. Literacy events which involve mobile literacies might
include (for example) sending a flirtatious SMS, ‘commenting’ on a new chapter of an online story, or ‘deleting’, or ‘unfriending’ someone’ on a social network site such as Facebook or MXit.

**Literacy practices**

Specific social beliefs about writing, or ‘literacy practices’ undergird literacy events and give them meaning and ideological values in society. Thus, while middle class parents approve of bedtime stories for young children and may encourage their children to use word-processing to write their school assignments, they may be horrified by their graffiti or textisms. In the context of mobile communication, literacy practices might encompass the situationally specific meanings associated with responsiveness – what does it mean if someone is slow to respond to a flirtatious text message? Is it appropriate to ask for a job via SMS? Thus the definition of ‘literacy’ is an ideological move, which imposes ‘particular norms of social behaviour and particular relationships of power’ (Buckingham, 2007:149)

The literacy practices associated with Western schooling are just one form of literacy among many. For example, anthropologists have found that these ‘schooled’ versions of literacy may have higher social status, but they are not always as helpful to people as the literacies that are acquired and used outside school settings. These insights led researchers to focus on people’s competencies, rather than their deficiencies -- even people viewed as ‘illiterate’ in school terms are often able to use literacy outside school to achieve their purposes (Prinsloo and Breier, 1996).

**Interaction through written genres**

The socially specific conventions which regulate written interaction in particular contexts give rise to characteristic ‘genres’ used by sign-makers as they interact with others and enact particular social relationships (Kress, 2003). An example of a genre involving mobile literacies would be the exchange of ‘micro-coordinating’ messages (Ling & Yttri, 2002) which allow mobile phone users to meet up without arranging a precise meeting place or time beforehand. This genre implies a relatively informal relationship, and emphasises the value of flexibility and spontaneity in this particular social interaction.

**New social contexts**

Mobile communication allows already networked people to communicate ‘anywhere anytime’. It also introduces new forms of networked social interaction, and makes digital communication accessible to large numbers of people who were previously entirely excluded from networked communication. This introduces possibilities for new digital uses of language, new genres, discourses and forms of social interaction that reflect a different set of social and cultural beliefs.

**Young South Africans and literacy, in and out of school**
South African schools still struggle to teach the majority of children how to read and write in ways that help them to succeed academically (Fleisch, 2008:2). Fleisch (2008) reports the findings of a range of standardised literacy tests where study after study finds severe problems with literacy teaching in all but a small minority of middle-class schools. Despite 15 years of redress for the educational inequities of apartheid, this achievement gap reflects how social class still strongly conditions poor and working-class children’s under-achievement. In South Africa, classroom studies of literacy practices explain that teachers’ reliance on drill-based pedagogic approaches to reading give rise to a ‘highly circumscribed version of literacy’ (Prinsloo, 2004:302). A switch to English medium instruction in early years does not develop children’s abilities to make meanings in the written versions of their home languages and heavy use of phonics (which do not always reinforce local pronunciations) leaves little time for reading stories (Pluddeman, Mati and Mahlalela, 1998).

Children’s introduction to literacy practices before they go to school, and those they encounter in their leisure time play an important role in their future success at school. This differential access of middle and working class children to school literacy and artefacts such as books begins at home (Fleisch, 2008:64, Prinsloo, 2004), continues during pre-school (Prinsloo and Stein, 2004) and contributes to distinctive bimodal patterns of school achievement from the foundation phase of primary school (Moloi and Strauss, 2005) through to secondary school (Fleisch, 2008:25-26).

South African studies show that, although many poor families are extraordinarily committed to literacy and education, there is no easy fit between the literacy practices many children learn at home, the practices entrenched in marginal schools (where books, libraries and computers are also scarce), and those valued in elite contexts (Stein and Slonimsky, 2006, Fleisch, 2008:76). Contemporary criticism of the post-apartheid OBE (Outcomes Based Education) curriculum in South Africa highlights the mismatch between the resource-based learning envisaged by curriculum designers and the context of schooling where ‘there are no textbooks, no photocopying machines, libraries or other facilities’ (Bloch, 2008).

Inequalities also exist in relation to the right to use writing, or what Kress calls ‘writing-rights’ (Kress, 1994:21). He explains how society differentiates between highly valued ‘productive’ writing (such as the original texts of an educated social elite of journalists, researchers, and novelists) and routinised forms of writing which he terms ‘reproductive’ writing, such as many texts by school children or secretaries, for example (Kress, 1994:34, 41). Thus a differential in social power separates the ‘author’ from the scribe. This differential is also present in the limited ‘writing-rights’ accorded to children in many South African classrooms, where children’s writing falls squarely into the reproductive mode. Hendricks, studying classroom literacy practices in Grahamstown, reports little evidence of productive writing (2007). Research conducted in schools in the Goldfields township schools in the Free State describes children working in classes where very few textbooks and other learning
materials are available. Children commonly transcribe from a textbook, or copy the teacher’s words from the board (Schlebusch and Thobedi, 2004).

Thus literacy practices in most South African homes do not prepare children for schooling in the same way that middle class practices do, while most children’s schooling sets them up to fail, and accords them little experience of authorship.

There are few studies of leisure reading among older township children. One small-scale study (Pretorius and Ribbens, 2005) of both lower-middle and working class children in grade seven and eight reports that all children enjoyed reading and had similar levels of access to newspapers at home. Nonetheless, the working class children (who attended a township school) reported little leisure reading of fiction, none had read a book at home in the previous year and few remembered their parents reading stories to them. This limited exposure to books means that many learners are unfamiliar with children’s literature or popular youth genres such as fantasy or comic books. A national survey found that, on average, South African children have access to about 32 books at home, but that almost two-thirds report having no books or less than five books at home (Moloi and Strauss, 2005). Such studies are primarily interested in the development of schooled literacy, and thus tend to reveal only deficits in literacy, particularly because they seldom consider other popular leisure literacy practices. This study will show that such practices have expanded massively with the broader accessibility of text-based communication practices subsequent to South Africa’s mobile revolution.

Many South African children encounter computers and PC-based internet only in the context of the circumscribed classroom practices associated with school literacy (Walton, 2007, Prinsloo and Walton, 2008). Although phones have been called ‘the PC of Africa’ (Ford and Botha, 2009:12) digital literacies in this context take on a different character since social contexts of phone use are radically different from those of computer use in the global north. The emphasis on social contexts in the New Literacy Studies suggests that the mere presence of a technology such as mobile phones or mobile Internet will not shift cultural practices in marginal contexts and make them resemble more highly valued activities in better resourced contexts elsewhere. Cellphones can now access the Internet, but this does not mean that teens will want to stop their chatting on MXit and instead ‘leapfrog’ en masse to elite literacy practices such as reading fantasy novels.

This project asks whether the m4Lit project has been able to make the right connections with teens’ existing mobile literacies and with popular sites for mobile youth culture, such as MXit, by investigating the nature and extent of teens’ access to, understanding of, and creative uses for MXit and mobile Internet.
New literacies and online participation in the global north

The leisure literacy practices of wealthier teens in the global north are well documented, particularly those which involve their online activities. In countries where the Internet is broadly accessible, teens often take the lead in Internet use. In the UK, for example, a survey conducted in 2004 (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007:675) found that only 3% of a random national sample of 9-19 year olds did not use the Internet, while a majority had home access (74%) and most were daily users (41%). In 2008, the figures for of children online (6-17 years) in the EU as a whole exceeded the overall figures for the population as a whole, with an average figure of 75% of children online, ranging from 94% of children in Finland online to 45% online in Italy (mobile Internet use was not investigated in either of these studies.)

In UK government policy, internet users are seen as climbing a metaphorical ‘ladder’ of opportunities presented by Internet use, advancing from ‘basic’ activities such as email and browsing to more ‘advanced’ activities and transactions, such as banking or accessing government sites’, at which stage they are believed to have attained ‘digital inclusion’ (qtd. in Livingstone & Helsper, 2007:673). Studies of young people’s ‘internet literacy’ show them progressively taking up more opportunities online, proceeding from ‘basic’ information-seeking through ‘moderate’ use of games and online communication (email), to broad use, which expands to peer-to-peer involvement in instant messaging and downloading music, to all-round use, where creative and participatory uses become part of the repertoire (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007: 673). A range of studies have found that differences in socio-economic status (SES) have consequences for children’s internet access and that higher status families and those with higher levels of education are more likely to have children who use the internet (Tsatsou, Pruulmannn-Vengerfeldt and Murru, 2009: 113). They also have consequences for the range of online opportunities which children take up, and in many countries, while ‘children from working-class families use the internet for leisure, downloading content and entertainment, children from middle-class families also tend to use it for education, information and civic participation purposes’ (Tsatsou et al 2009)

In the U.S., Internet use is near-ubiquitous among teens, and 93% of teens ages 12-17 go online, as do 93% of young adults ages 18-29. Of these teens with internet access, 73% now use social networking websites, up from 55% in November 2006 (Lenhart et al, 2010). Fewer teens (75%) have cellphones than internet access. In 2004, when only 45% of US teens had a mobile phone, 10% of them used it to go online, while 2% of those with a PDA (7%) used it to go online (Lenhart, 2009). While more recent data is not currently available about teens’ mobile internet use, among the adult population in the US mobile internet use is becoming more common, particularly among African Americans. In 2009 in the US more African Americans accessed the internet on their mobile phone (29%) than the national average (19%) (Horrigan, 2009).
Thus in the highly networked contexts of the global north, teens are reading and writing in social networks and online ‘affinity spaces’ [Gee, 2003] (where fans gather to discuss their favourite movies, games, or books), blogging, podcasting, networking, instant messaging and posting status updates on social network sites. In these spaces, media are evolving into newly ‘conversational’ forms, a shift enabled by networked technologies, and by large-scale involvement in a ‘participatory culture’ (Jenkins, et al, 2006:3) but these conversations are shaped by those with easy access to the Internet, particularly to broadband via desktop computers.

This culture is thus defined in terms of new opportunities for the creation and dissemination of messages, for public participation in online communities, and for informal processes of learning (Jenkins, et al, 2006:3), which are all becoming an integral part of 21st century consumer culture and marketing practice. The widespread adoption of such practices by a global elite are seen to be ‘redefining what it means to be literate in the 21st century’ (Coiro et al., 2008:10). Unfettered, skilful mobility through vast online spaces of mediated culture is seen as the key to the power of cultural production, while there are potentially grave consequences for a cultural underclass, trapped on the wrong side of the ‘participation gap’ and unable to partipate in networked culture (Jenkins et al., 2006:60-61).

Jenkins and colleagues respond to this by defining the components of such new literacies as a curriculum, an impulse which, as Ito and colleagues point out, ‘normalises’ one particular version of youth practices. Instead, these scholars identify ‘an intergenerational struggle of literacy norms’, which they associate with youth-defined literacy practices, such as ‘deliberately casual forms of online speech’, social norms associated with social networking, and new representational genres (such as mashups, remix and machinima) (2010:26). They point out the significance of this shift - adult institutions (such as home and school) no longer monopolize the meaning of literacy, in fact, their influence is somewhat marginalized. Finally, they point to the influence of these contests on the evolving social meanings and uses of new media technologies, and predict that certain new media literacies may result in ‘foundational changes’ in cultural expression (Ito et al., 2010:24-6)

**Instant messaging and literacy**

Existing research into digital and new literacies currently has limited relevance in contexts like South Africa, where computers, desktop Internet, and English are not broadly accessible. New research is needed into internet use on mobile phones, which have limited processing power and screen space for multitasking, which rely on relatively expensive mobile bandwidth (mobile data rates are massively cheaper than SMS but more expensive than landline connectivity). In this context, phones are also used by people whose needs and interests may be very different to the English-speaking
middle class college students in the US or Europe whose practices are often documented in studies of 'new literacies'.

One area of overlap is instant messaging (IM), which plays a central role both in web based communication, and in the mobile literacies of South African teens. Reading and writing for real-time interaction are key practices of both PC-based IM and chat on MXit, and studies of IM on computer thus make for a very productive comparison with local uses of messaging in MXit.

Lewis and Fabos studied a small group of primarily middle class white US teens, who participated in distinctive literacy events associated with simultaneous IM sessions with their peers. Adult print culture, as enshrined in many schools, idealises a focused relationship with a set of stable, authentic texts, and a unified approach to knowledge (Lewis and Fabos, 2005). In contrast, teen IM was performative and required flexibility and adaptation to a range of genres and modes, and a repertoire which allowed sensitivity and responsiveness to a changing flux of discursive and social spaces (Lewis and Fabos, 2005:495). Instant messaging is a hybrid between spoken and written discourse (‘[using] writing to perform speech’) where participants need to be able to participate in ‘quick, sometimes overlapping, dyadic interactions with different audiences’ (Lewis and Fabos, 2005:484). As the authors of the study explain, if a young teenaged participant wanted to join a new group online, she had to ‘write her way into the textual worlds of the new group to which she wanted to belong’ (Lewis and Fabos, 2005:495)

Teens need to learn to use IM to project a coherent yet responsive identity across the range of their relationships, and they do so with the objective of maintaining social status online. They achieve this goal by designing and maintaining a social network, by holding attention from others, and by managing their own attention (Lewis and Fabos, 2005:484-6).

Thus this study suggests that, rather than one ‘ladder’ of opportunities, or a single ‘new media peer groups and literacy’, teens’ uses of literacy involve multiple responses to the demands of participation in youth culture.

Youth and mobile networking

Globally, mobile phones have been adopted by teens and incorporated as a central aspect of youth culture. Researchers from around the world have documented teens using mobile communication as they develop and cultivate their own individual social networks (cf. Castells, Qui, Fernández-Ardèvol, and Sey, 2007). This ‘perpetual contact’ with a small peer group (Katz and Aakhus, 2002) is seen to give rise to a ‘full-time intimate community’ (Matsuda, 2006). Mobile communication, as it has been configured around text messaging and phone calls, functions in many contexts to reinforce intensive networking, or ties between close friends and family. Genres of
text-based communication identified by Ito and Okabe include ‘lightweight messaging’ where messages sent throughout the day generate a sense of ‘ambient virtual co-presence’, while more focused uses of mobile texting are associated with synchronous chat, and the augmented ‘flesh meet’ where text messaging allows physically absent friends to participate in a face to face gathering (Ito and Okabe, 2006:271).

Thus the combination of literacy, written communication and mobile networks play an important part in allowing individuals to reconfigure their social situation, surroundings or Umwelt (Goffman, 1964). To account for the shifts in social context brought about through telecommunications, Jones suggests that social surroundings should be defined as ‘an individual’s environment of communicative possibilities’ which now include mediated communication such as television, radio, and interpersonal communication, via telephone, or instant messaging (2002:6-7,11-12).

Cellphone use and messaging in a social context (such as when teens are with family or friends) can constitute ‘involvement screens’ (Scollon, 2001) which signal a lack of involvement with others. This may infringe the norms of communication for that particular situation (as a bridegroom recently did when updating Twitter during his wedding ceremony). Thus despite the ‘muted’ mode of text communication (Jones, 2002) used when instant messaging or texting, screening may be used to construct ‘alternative’ social contexts and thus sometimes perceived as disrespectful to others or disruptive of shared activities in that space.

Social support and mobile networks in marginal contexts

Cultural and economic differences do affect how and to what extent mobile technologies are adopted in particular social contexts. Existing global overviews (e.g. Castells et al., 2007) are not very useful in establishing how or to what extent the practices of young people in Africa may conform to or differ from those of the northern elite. While global, modernising influences are apparent, particularly in urban contexts (cf. Bosch, 2008), many young people in African countries may experience mobile communication differently to their peers in more affluent countries. Key differences include limited access to computers and the internet, low incomes and high ongoing access costs both for mobile phones and internet subscriptions, and widespread sharing practices.

Given the differential pricing of voice and text, and the high costs of bandwidth, audio and video communication are expensive luxuries, while written communication (by SMS or MXit) is much cheaper. For many in South Africa’s rural areas, even text messaging is not possible without intermediaries, and people who do not command writing are forced to rely disproportionately on more expensive options such as voice calls. While in the UK the ratio between outgoing voice calls and SMS messages is 0.6:1; in South Africa as a whole, the ratio is 3:1 for pre-paid mobile phones. In rural communities in South Africa, the ratio is 13:1 (Vodafone, 2005:1).
Previous studies have suggested that, among impoverished users in countries such as South Africa and Tanzania, mobile phones are often used to manage strong links, or close ties ‘the links that make up tight-knit support networks’, and that they are not used so frequently to manage weaker links (Goodman, 2005:58). This suggests a local variant of the above-mentioned global pattern of using mobile communication for intensive rather than extensive networking -- to reinforce strong ties in personal networks rather than leveraging weaker ties or making new connections. Studies in Central Asia have found that in developing contexts these social networks have particular importance since, citizens rely heavily on their social networks of inter-personal communication for information (Kolko, Rose and Johnson, 2007).

Cost-saving strategies used in these contexts include the use of text messages, callback messages, ‘beeping’ or deliberately missed calls (cf. Donner, 2007), and also include the ‘link-up’ calls of Jamaican mobile phone users (Horst & Miller, 2005) who prioritise intermittent and brief phone-calls to a large number of relatively weak ties, rather than cocooning with a small number of intimates through the ambient exchange of messaging. The maintenance of large networks of weak ties is, like the intensive networking seen in South Africa, also an important coping strategy which helps low-income households survive in that particular context (Horst and Miller, 2005:755).

Strategic uses of mobile communication to maintain both intensive and extensive social networks are thus essential strategies for many marginalised households and individuals in developing countries. This study argues that teen instant messaging and social networking should not simply be regarded as inferior or degraded versions of (schooled) literacy or as deficient in relation to the computer-based activities of their wealthier peers, but that they should be understood in context, firstly as preparation for adult life where access to social networks plays a key role in survival, and secondly as a way of learning to reconfigure these surroundings through social connections and by engaging with the expressive resources and pleasures of global youth culture.
3. M4Lit Research Project

This report focuses on data from two surveys conducted with 61 school-going isiXhosa speaking teenaged residents of Guguletu and Langa in Cape Town. Teens from the target age-group (14-17 years) were recruited in these areas, to constitute a convenience sample (57% female, 43% male). Both Guguletu and Langa are currently low-income suburbs of Cape Town popularly known as ‘townships’; Langa was the first area in Cape Town designated as a black residential area, while Guguletu was created in the 1960s, under apartheid policies of racially segregated housing.

By the standards of South African urban areas, most of the families of the m4Lit participants would be considered economically and educationally marginalized (Of the care-givers, 28% are in permanent employment and 14% have a diploma or university degree). A smaller group of the participants (12%) are shacks-dwellers, who count among the most marginalised residents of urban and peri-urban areas. Deumert (2010) provides a more detailed discussion of the socio-economic background of participants and the households to which they belong.

Teens were recruited for the study if they owned or had daily access to a GPRS-enabled mobile phone. The overwhelming majority of Cape Town teens have access to such a phone (100% of teens in low-income areas, with 96% reporting daily use) and in 2008 almost 70% of these phones had GPRS (Kreutzer, 2009), a number which has certainly risen since then.

Research Methodology

The interviews for the two surveys were conducted using a conversational approach (the ethno-survey) which is documented in more detail by Deumert (2009)). The first survey was conducted in October 2009 (n=61) and the second in November 2009 with a slightly reduced group (n=50), a subset of the participants.

A usability evaluation of the Kontax mobisite (www.kontax.mobi) was conducted, where four pairs of teens were observed and recorded on video as they used their phones to access the site, register, and read a chapter from the novel while talking about their mobile IM and Internet use. Two additional focus groups were conducted with small groups of male and female teens respectively (n=10). Both usability evaluations and focus groups were conducted with participants drawn from the larger sample.
RESEARCH AIMS

The overall project aimed to understand how teenagers use Internet-enabled phones in reading fiction and writing/txtting for leisure, how they discuss reading experiences with their peers in an online environment. This report documents out-of-school digital and mobile literacies, primarily as reported by the teens who participated in the survey and focus groups for m4Lit, but also as inferred from participation patterns by visitors to the mobisite.

Access to ICT and involvement in digital literacy practices

The first survey documented aspects of teens’ existing digital literacy practices, namely:

- Leisure and out-of-school digital literacy practices, contexts where leisure reading and writing might take place, experiences of reading and writing for pleasure, recreational reading.
- Teens’ levels of access to ICTs and consumer electronics, and the most regular uses for, and social contexts of teens’ ICT use (focusing on cellphones, computers and the Internet).
- The extent of teens’ social network on MXit or other mobile instant messengers, and the social contexts for MXit and SMS messaging.

Social networks - Peers as audience and intermediaries

The second survey and the focus groups explored teens’ existing mobile literacy practices, with a specific focus on the literacy practices associated with MXit, as this was the most popular online activity. In particular the following issues were investigated:

- Sharing practices and mobile phones.
- Literacy events online, as defined and expected by the peer culture which has evolved around MXit use.
- How teens learn about MXit, and which abilities and skills they value.
- The nature and extent of the social networking practices supported by MXit.

Familiarity with the mobile web

The usability evaluation focused on the extent to which teens were familiar with the conventions of the mobile web, by observing their responses to the design of the Kontax mobisite, using a pair-based think-aloud protocol. A semi-structured interview was also conducted, which explored teens’ responses to the story and website in relation to multimodality, story genre, length, usability, affordability, sharability, commenting, social network features and site navigation.

Mobile discourse and mobisite lexical profiles

The process of developing the story and translations for the m-novel, and designing and developing the mobisite and MXit interface are discussed in more detail in Deumert (2010) and Vosloo (2010).
Data generated from use of the mobisite and MXit in particular reflects the activities of a broader range of readers than participated in the m4Lit surveys, since a diverse group of users (in terms of geographical location, language, age, and ethnic background) accessed the site. While detailed usage information and server logs were not available, general usage data was provided by MXit Lifestyle. In addition, the text posted to the website was analysed to investigate the language use of participants, focusing on their use of textisms and codeswitching.
4. AUDIENCE & ENGAGEMENT

The Kontax campaign was vastly more successful on MXit than on the mobisite. While there were over 3000 attempts to register on the Kontax mobisite, only 207 users completed the registration process successfully, and a smaller group of active users (67) got involved in commenting and creating profiles on the mobisite. Usability testing revealed that some teens had severe difficulties with the web interface on the mobisite, particularly when trying to register. User experiences of the mobisite and its highly engaged community of readers and writers are discussed in Chapter 7, while this chapter focuses on the MXit campaign.

Kontax was marketed on MXit to users who fell into the eleven to eighteen year old age groups. The month-long campaign had a market value of R 196 050.00, but was provided free of charge to m4Lit by MXit Lifestyle as a Corporate Social Responsibility project. The costing of the campaign included two million ‘splash screen’ impressions (R120 000), two Tradepost messages, which were broadcast to all the users who logged in on 3 and 21 November (R60 000) the development and hosting of a portal (R10 000) which made the Kontax ‘contact’ available to users included all the Kontax chapters, a form where users could submit entries to the Kontax competition, and downloadable Kontax themed graphics or ‘wallpapers’ (R3300).

Users have continued to access Kontax via MXit in the months subsequent to the campaign. Nonetheless, this report focuses on the campaign data, which includes user activities from 31 October to 26 November. The following discussion of the impact and engagement generated by the campaign relies on the standard data logged on MXit servers and provided by MXit Lifestyle to their clients.

As such, the data discussed below is subject to certain reservations. Some of these reservations are common to all research projects which use server data from an online community to describe user behaviour, while some of the peculiarities of the data are unique to the MXit platform.

Like many websites and chatrooms, demographic data about Kontax subscribers is based on user self-report data at registration, which is notoriously unreliable. Users are anonymous and may supply fake age and gender details, for example. Data about Kontax subscribers do not necessarily describe unique users, but rather unique MXit clients. Some users have more than one MXit account. At the same time, shared use is common among teens, and some users may not be counted, as they are looking over a friend’s shoulder as they use MXit or read Kontax.
At the time of the campaign, MXit could not provide any cumulative totals to measure the overall reach of the campaign (overall total number of unique users who viewed Kontax marketing messages). (MXit have subsequently moved to a reporting system where clients ‘buy’ a MXit audience measured in unique users, rather than impressions [Mike Carter, 2010, personal communication, 12 February]). Finally, no cumulative totals of unique subscribers were available, only ‘snapshots’ of the number of subscribers at particular times, and no detailed breakdown of user activity was available to us, other than raw page view totals.

**MXIT CAMPAIGN**

MXit is a java application, rather than a website, and navigation relies on the user ‘subscribing’ to content ‘bots’ who provide content through an automated dialogue process. Messages from the content ‘bots’ are organised in separate tabs, thus mimicking an instant messenger-style dialogue, which takes place via MUD-style text options (see Figure 1). The MXit interface is designed to work on an extremely wide range of GPRS-compatible phones, and the application is thus heavily text-based rather than graphical. It also relies on extensive user customisation as users ‘add’ and ‘delete’ content, much as they add and delete their MXit ‘contacts’ (friends or chat buddies). As illustrated in Figure 1, MXit is economical with the small screens used by most users, and uses an IM interaction metaphor rather than relying the more usual web-based hyperlink convention.

**Kontax marketing - Splash screens and Tradepost messages**

The ‘splash screen’ is a small graphic, which is displayed as the user logs in to MXit. It takes up the whole of the phone’s screen and serves as
an advertisement for content or services to which users are invited to subscribe. During the first month after the launch of Kontax on MXit (30 Oct - 4 Nov 2009), an average of 30 763 users per day viewed the Kontax ‘splash screen’ (see Figure 2) as they logged into MXit. (The daily numbers of users who viewed the splashscreen ranged from 12540 to 64034). MXit did not provide details regarding the weekly or monthly viewership of the advertisement and it is not possible to estimate the full reach of the marketing campaign.

MXit Tradepost messages broadcast a short message to each user who logs in during a particular period. The following Tradepost messages were used to publicise the Kontax campaign:

Kontax is a new short story on your cellphone about the adventures of 4 cool teenagers. Read it and send us your ideas for the next Kontax story – you can WIN big prizes! Add Kontax under MXit Mix > Education.

I Kontax libali elifutshane elitsha kwi selula yakho elingamahla-ndinyuka eeteenagers ezikwayi eziyi 4. Lifunde,dibana nabadlali usithumele izimvo zakho ngebali le Kontax elilandelayo-UngaWINA amabhaso amakhulu! Yongeza u Kontax phantsi ko MXit mix.

On 3 November, a total of 21 787 478 of these Tradepost messages were broadcast as users logged in and 32 410 new subscribers subscribed to Kontax during that day. MXit reports that users log in an average of seven times per day, and so we can estimate that just over 1% of the users who received the Tradepost message went on to subscribe to the Kontax ‘bot’.

A second Tradepost message went out as follows, on 21 November:

Heya! Kontax is a new mystery story about Sbu, a missing girl & a cellphone – Visit Tradepost > MXit Mix > Education > Kontax now to start reading the exciting chapters, meet the characters & download awesome wallpapers. Be a part of this story... P-)

This time, 22 082156 such Tradepost messages were broadcast as users logged in and 33 166 new subscribers subscribed to Kontax during the day, again a conversion rate of just over 1%. Although only a minority of the MXit users who received the message were interested in reading the Kontax story or entering the competition, this is nonetheless a substantial number of users.

**Subscriber numbers and growth**

By the end of the Kontax campaign, at the end of November 2009, at least 63 310 users had shown interest in the Kontax story by navigating to MXit’s Tradepost area, locating Kontax (in the ‘MXit Mix>Education’ section), and ‘adding’ it to their list of contacts, thus gaining access to the story.
These 63 310 users can be considered interested readers, whom we will term subscribers. The figure 63 310 is a minimum number of subscribers, since MXit only provides a weekly snapshot of subscriber numbers (see Figure 4). During the periods between these ‘snapshots’ there is a certain level of churn as users add and remove the Kontax ‘contact’ from their list of contacts on MXit.

Geographical distribution

Data from MXit indicated that most of Kontax’s readers lived in urban areas, with the majority from Gauteng (69%) although a smaller group were Western Cape residents (16%). The other more rural provinces together only made up about 15% of Kontax readers on MXit (see Figure 3). As geographical data has only been collected about MXit users for a couple of years (Mike Carter, 2010, personal communication, 12 February), it is not clear whether this corresponds to the geographical distribution of MXit users.

![Geographical distribution of Kontax subscribers](image)

**Figure 3: Geographical distribution of Kontax subscribers**

Gender

Although a detailed breakdown of the gender of MXit users in this age group was not available to us, our data (see Table 1) suggests that Kontax may have been more appealing to female users than to males, since when compared with the overall gender distribution of MXit users, more female than male MXit users signed up to be Kontax subscribers, a statistically significant difference (P= 0.009). (P values < 0.05 were considered statistically significant for this study).
Table 1: Gender distribution of Kontax subscribers and MXit users

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Kontax subscribers (%)</th>
<th>MXit users (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Females</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Males</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age

The proportion of 11-18 year olds among Kontax subscribers was reported in weekly subscriber figures, and ranged between 36% and 44% of the total. The weekly average proportion of 11-18 year old subscribers for the whole campaign is 41.1%. Of the 63 310 users who had subscribed to Kontax by the end of the campaign, 36% were older teens (15-18), while 8% were younger (11-14) and thus 27 856 Kontax subscribers belonged to the targeted age group of 11-18 year olds.

Kontax audience on MXit: 11-18 years (30 Oct - 26 Nov 2009)

Figure 4: Estimates: Kontax audience on MXit: 11-18 years (30 Oct - 26 Nov 2009)

Kontax generated substantial interest from South African teens from around the country. About 28 000 young people in the age group 11-18 signed up to read the novel on their phones (via MXit) over the month of the Kontax campaign, while an equally large group of around 27 000 users from a slightly older bracket (ages 19-25) also subscribed, even though they had not been directly targeted with the splashscreen campaign. (It is likely that several younger teens fall into this group, as it is a common practice for younger teens to exaggerate their age for the purposes of their MXit registration.)
The majority of Kontax subscribers (56%) in fact fall outside the target age group. This age distribution of subscribers suggests that there may be substantial demand for mobile fiction among older MXit users as well as by the younger teenagers targeted by the Kontax splash screens. The readership growth shown in Figure 4 does not show a viral pattern, since major jumps in subscription numbers correspond with the dates when a Tradepost message was sent out.

Overall subscriber numbers (at least 63,310 in all age groups) are substantial even when compared to the MXit audiences for more established teen brands, such as Seventeen Magazine (about 150,000 MXit subscribers) or X-Box (about 100,000 subscribers). There is still room for growth here, since the MXit subscriber figures for Kontax represent only 2% of MXit’s reported 3,380,000 registered users in the targeted age groups.

**Estimated readership**

MXit only provides raw page view statistics, and so it is not possible to develop an exact breakdown of reader activities by age group, nor is it possible to know the number of unique users who downloaded Kontax chapters. Working out readership estimates for each chapter requires three major assumptions.

1. We have assumed that teen readership (11–18 years) of individual chapters remained constant across the chapters, and that it was proportional to the number of teens as a percentage of subscribers in that week.

2. Since many readers are multilingual, and we did not know how many readers read both the English and isiXhosa versions of Kontax, we used only the data from the English readership in our discussion of the overall audience. The figures below thus probably underestimate the readership by a small amount. A more detailed discussion of the readership of the isiXhosa version of the story is available in Deumert (2009).

3. Since MXit did not provide data about the activities of unique users, we need to estimate a number of readers from the total number of page views of individual chapters. As illustrated in Table 2, the marketing campaign generated 94,185 views of Chapter 1. Considering that only 63,310 subscribers added the MXit contact, it is likely that a large number of chapter views may have been repeat views - some users seem to have downloaded the chapter more than once. Alternatively, or in addition, page views may have been incremented when users pressed ‘back’ after reading a chapter. A repeat page view factor of 1.5 was used to estimate readership in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>30 Oct - 27 Nov</th>
<th>Subscribers</th>
<th>Pageviews</th>
<th>Estimated readership</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All</td>
<td>Added Kontax contact</td>
<td>63,310</td>
<td>94185</td>
<td>63,310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 1</td>
<td></td>
<td>45228</td>
<td>30,402</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 21 may have had a certain novelty value (a novel on a cellphone, an m-novel in isiXhosa) and many users seem to have merely 'dipped into' the novel to see what an m-novel would be like, or to find out whether they enjoyed the genre (teen mystery). As one of the mobisite visitors commented 'i only dd this 2 check hw a book on da web wil b like'. Other mobisite visitors commented approvingly on the story genre, responding both to the teen themes ('ITS ABOUT THE THINGS HAPPENING IN A TEENAGERS LIFE') and the intrigues of the episodic mystery plot 'a little day by day which keeps us intrigued..i really do like it'. About half the teens (12 685 or 46% of the subscribers) who read Chapter 1 continued to read Chapter 2. The teen mystery genre thus appears to have appealed to many interested readers, but not to all.

As Figure 5 reveals, the drop-off after Chapter 2 continued more gradually. We can estimate that
around 7,206 (26% of subscribers) persevered and read the entire series of 21 chapters during the month of the Kontax campaign on MXit.

Since the socio-economic status of these MXit readers is unknown to us, it is worth comparing the MXit figures to the levels of readership among the teens from Guguletu and Langa who participated in the m4Lit survey. The overall reported uptake of Kontax was considerably higher among the survey participants (66.7%) than among the general MXit target audience. This can be attributed to the encouragement, technical assistance and reminders which the survey participants received, but it nonetheless suggests a high level of enthusiasm for reading, albeit fostered by this particular community of practice. Like the MXit users, only a minority of the surveyed teens persisted in more regular reading of Kontax, with only 10.4% (N=5) reading all the chapters. Kontax thus appears to have been successful in engaging some highly committed readers and sustaining their interest across the relatively long narrative, although these enthusiastic Kontax readers were a relatively small percentage of the target audience.

**From reading to writing**

Since MXit did not provide any forum for user generated content, Kontax readers were referred to the Kontax mobisite for interactive features. The only interactive feature available on MXit was the ability to post entries for the writing competition, which generated over 2000 entries. According to AdMob, the MXit landing page received the highest number of hits of all the pages on the www.kontax.mobi site during the October-November 2009 period, with 8,076 MXit users clicking on a link from MXit to open the Kontax home page in their wap browsers.

**Conclusion**

For South African book publishers, a fiction title is considered to have done well if it sells around 5,000 copies, and it takes only 20,000 sales for a title to be considered a ‘hit’ (Mathews, 2006). By these measures, Kontax and the m4Lit project succeeded in reaching a substantial audience of urban South African teens, mostly concentrated in Gauteng and the Western Cape. MXit was central to the success of the project. After the MXit launch, Kontax and the m4Lit project succeeded in reaching a broad national audience of urban teens, and the story seems to have proved highly engaging for a minority group of readers who completed all the chapters.

MXit statistics suggest relatively high levels of interest in the Kontax campaign, both within the group of teens and preteens, but also possibly among a group of older teens and young adults (19-25). We do not have full data regarding the reach of the Kontax campaign, and so we cannot estimate exactly what proportion of the targeted group added the Kontax contact and thus were interested in reading Kontax or entering the writing competition. Further details about MXit’s exact reach in this
age group would be needed to establish the exact level of interest from the broader targeted group.

Of the 11-18 year old Kontax subscribers, we estimate that just under half (46%) downloaded at least two chapters, while a smaller minority (26%) were drawn into the story sufficiently to finish or at least download all 21 chapters.

Thus although those who read the whole story amounted to a minority of subscribers, the data also suggest a substantial amount of interest. The provision of additional story genres might be able to broaden the impact of future initiatives, and perhaps more interactive features might help to retain more readers. Finally, delinking the project from the ‘Education’ label it received in MXit might attract a less academically oriented group.

Kontax was particularly successful among those who enjoyed the teen mystery genre, and it also gained a strong following from a small group of highly enthusiastic fans who participated extensively via user generated content and social networking activities on the kontax.mobi website. When one considers MXit’s reported 15 million registered users, there is still plenty of room for growth.

The promise of the m4Lit project remains unfulfilled in relation to the majority of MXit users in the target age group. While computers and even books are relatively inaccessible to most South African teens, this is increasingly not the case with mobile Internet access. In relation to this potential mass audience, then, many teenaged MXit users did not encounter the campaign or respond to it, and of those who did respond by subscribing to Kontax, more than half did not return to the story after reading Chapter 1. Without the free publicity from MXit (for which most campaigns would need to pay), the audience reached only via the mobisite would have been a fraction of the numbers reached via MXit.

Although MXit proved highly effective as a means of reaching a broad South African teen audience, particularly in urban areas, it was not an appropriate platform to engage teens as writers and it did not provide them with a platform for their own writing and an audience of peers in the way the m4Lit project had initially envisaged.

The readership graph in Figure 4 shows readership levels responding primarily to incentives such as the competition. Neither the mobisite nor the MXit IM environment seem to have been ideal for translating readers’ enthusiasm about Kontax into viral growth. If viral patterns existed, they was unlikely to make themselves felt in such a short campaign. At any rate, since Kontax chapters could not be saved outside MXit and passed around, the novel could not be shared via bluetooth, as teens do with other media. In addition, MXit’s lack of user generated content meant that the
competition entries and the creative activities of a committed group of Kontax fans on the mobisite did not become visible to MXit readers, and thus they did not drive further growth of the kontax.mobi community.

Teen responses to Kontax suggest that future projects should provide a wider variety of reading material and languages so that all interested readers might be engaged, and should experiment with different formats to accommodate a range of reading styles. Finally, to engage teens in fictional writing, and to give them the tools which will help to pass on their enthusiasm to others in their social networks, a new platform is required which allows teens to write as well as to read, thus increasing their engagement through sustained social involvement and fan activities within interest-based affinity spaces.

Finally, future educational projects which promise to democratise access to information need to investigate ways of reaching rural teens.
5. M4LIT TEENS AND ICT USE

OUT OF SCHOOL LITERACIES ARE MOBILE

When students write outside school, they are very unlikely to use computers, and their digital uses of literacies involve their mobile phones. Table 3 indicates that, in the first survey (n=61), 44% of teens reported that they had written something on the previous day. Of these, only one used a digital format to write what appears to have been an extended piece (‘story of my life’). In two thirds of the cases of writing outside school, the participants were writing messages on their mobile phones, either in the form of MXit chats or SMS messages, or, in one case, as an update on Facebook. The other third of teens’ out of school writing appears to have some relationship to school, but it also includes a range of poems, diaries and playlists, written with pen and paper, other than one autobiographical piece.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Writing activity</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
<th>Participants (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t write</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MXIT</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>story of my life</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>maths</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>school project</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>update my diary</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prayer</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>poem</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drama script</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>playlist</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>essay</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Everyday out-of-school writing activities (yesterday, n=61)

Similarly, Table 3 indicates that reading also takes place on primarily from mobile phones or paper, and not on computers. Other than Facebook, SMS and MXit (mentioned by 38% of participants) or television subtitles, mentioned by 3%), everything students had read on the previous day was printed on paper.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What did you read yesterday</th>
<th>mentions</th>
<th>Participants %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t read</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SMS</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
When asked what they did for fun, the m4Lit participants (n=61) most often mentioned either hanging out with friends (39%), or socialising on MXit or on their phones (23%), as indicated in Figure 6. In contrast, reading books or novels was a minority pursuit, but was nonetheless mentioned as an important leisure activity by 16% of the teens. (More participants mentioned reading than listening to music, which suggests that this response may have been primed to some extent by the m4Lit focus on literacy.)

![Figure 6: Enjoyable leisure activities (% n=61)](image)

### Table 4: Everyday out-of-school reading activities (yesterday, n=61)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MXIT</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspaper</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtitles, TV</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Book (novel)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolwork</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public poster</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Using computers, cellphones and other media

Cellphones are the most accessible media technology for the m4Lit sample, with 98% having used a cellphone ever before, and 92% reporting that they had used a cellphone on the previous day (see Figure 7). Although fewer teens reported having a cellphone ‘at home’, this is likely to reflect a
misunderstanding of the survey question, since, when answering a question about cellphone ownership, 82% said that they owned a mobile phone (n=61).

The m4Lit sample was selected according to whether the teenaged participants had easy access to a cellphone with internet access (GPRS), but these proportions are similar to those found among their peers in South African urban areas. For example, the ‘Generation mobile’ study (Kreutzer, 2009) used a pen and paper questionnaire to survey 441 Grade 11 students from schools in low income areas in Cape Town during Oct/Nov 2008. (Kreutzer, 2009), and found 100% had used cellphones, with 96% having used their phone on the previous day. Like the participants in the former study of Grade 11s in Cape Town, (Kreutzer, 2009), the teens surveyed by the m4Lit project were more likely to have used a cellphone ‘yesterday’ than to have used television, radio or computers, and thus mobile phones are the most commonly used communications media for this group.

Figure 7: Consumer electronics access ever, yesterday, and at home. (%)
Computers (desktops and laptops) are still not accessible to this group, with only 63.9% of respondents having ever used one. Neither are computers an everyday part of their media landscape, since only 18% reported having used a desktop computer on the previous day, and an equally small group reported having a computer at home.

Phones are not used all day, but appear to be an activity that fits into free or leisure time for most of the participants. While four participants reported that they used their phones ‘all the time’ or ‘24/7’, on average participants estimated that they used them for 6.2 hours per day, slightly more time than they reported that they spent watching television (mean = 4.7 hours).

Shared phone use
Not all of the m4Lit participants owned their own phones, with 18% reporting that they made use of someone else’s phone, in most cases one which belonged to their mother or another female relative. In the second survey (n=50), we asked participants about whether they used shared phones. Seventy two percent of the participants reported that they shared phones, with 22% reporting that they shared ‘often’, 26% sharing ‘occasionally’ and 26% sharing ‘rarely’.

As indicated in Figure 8, among this group who occasionally needed to share phones (n=36), a third shared because they did not have their own phones. The other co-users mentioned that their main reasons for needing to share a phone was if they were out of airtime (47%), had a flat battery (39%) or needed to use MXit or another advanced feature (11%) on someone else’s phone – probably because their own primary phone did not have that feature. Network problems only caused difficulties for one of the participants, possibly when out of the Cape Town area, as coverage in Cape Town is generally good.

**Cellphones at school**

Many schools forbid the use of cellphones, but 62.3% of the m4Lit participants said that they were in fact allowed to take their cellphones to school (see Table 5). While only 8.2% had taken their cellphones to school on the previous day, most had taken it to school on occasion (63.9%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cellphones at school</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Are you allowed to take your cellphone to school?</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>62.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you take your cellphone to school yesterday?</td>
<td>26.2</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did you ever take your cellphone to school?</td>
<td>34.4</td>
<td>63.9</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Taking cellphones to school: percentage allowed to, yesterday and ever (n=61).

Participants were divided on whether phones should be allowed at school, with 50.4% reporting a belief that phones should not be allowed at school. Thus several students who were allowed to take
their phones to school felt that they should not be allowed to do so. Of the 14 students who provided a reason for answering ‘No’ (see Table 6), six mentioned the danger of being mugged, as phones are relatively valuable objects. This consideration may also explain the relatively high numbers of participants who report that they ‘never’ use phones on public transport. The majority of students explained ways in which the presence of phones would be disruptive of schooling – that they would lead to rule-breaking, might disrupt lessons, and otherwise interfere with concentration.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons why phones should not be allowed at school</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Crime</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breaking rules</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disruptive</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interfere with concentration</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: Participants’ reasons for why phones should not be allowed at school (n=14).

Four participants gave reasons for answering that phones should be allowed at school, and emphasized the need to have a phone for an emergency (2), to dispel boredom (1), and to continue socialising with friends or lovers during schooltime (1). Only one student mentioned that the phone could be used to search for information.

**Spending on airtime**

A final key dimension of access includes the money which participants had available to spend on mobile communication. A majority of participants (n=35) reported using between R10-R20 in airtime per week. A smaller group (n=19) reported using between R25 and R55 airtime every week. Most of the students who belonged to this group of relatively high spenders bought either R30 (n=7) or R50 (n=R50) in airtime per week. Two students reported using more than R100 airtime per week, while two extremely low spenders only reported using R5 in airtime per week.

**Mobile-centric web use**

Participants used the web, both on their phones and on their computers, although they use their phones more often.
Table 7: Reported opportunities for web use taken up on PC and mobile web, ever and yesterday (n=61).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>7</th>
<th>15</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>12</th>
<th>5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As Table 7 indicates, 60% of participants reported in the first survey (n=61) that they had taken up at least one opportunity for web use on their phone on the previous day, while only 45% reported that they had done so on a computer. The higher prevalence of daily web use on phones constituted a significant difference (P=0.002) from reported levels of daily web use on computers. Participants were also slightly more likely to report that they had at some stage ('ever') taken up at least one opportunity for web use on a phone, rather than on a computer, but this difference was not significant at the 0.05 level used to test for statistical significance in this study (P = 0.5). (It is possible that in the face to face interview situation participants may have felt the need to save face and exaggerate their use of high status technologies such as computers.) Beyond this improved accessibility for daily use, having access to a web-enabled phone does not appear to expand the range of opportunities for web use on any particular day for this group. While 48% of participants reported between 2-9 mobile web activities on the previous day, a comparable number (42%) reported this level of activity on computers. This slightly higher likelihood of multiple online activities on phones than on computers is not a statistically significant difference at the 0.05 level (P=0.2) and thus use of the mobile internet is not associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in multiple online activities on any particular day.
Figure 9: Daily online activities on phones and on computers (‘yesterday’, n=61)

As Figure 9 indicates, the most common daily uses of the mobile web are general browsing for ‘fun’ (36%) downloading songs and ringtones (33%), accessing news (26%), email (26%) and visiting Facebook (25%). The opportunities which participants are likely to undertake on a daily basis by using their phones are somewhat different to the activities which they tend to undertake every day on PCs. In particular, as indicated in Table 8, news and social network sites such as Facebook are significantly more likely to be accessed on phones rather than on PCs on the previous day (Facebook P=0.01; News P=0.006).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Y/N</th>
<th>Phone access (%)</th>
<th>PC access (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access Facebook etc.</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>75</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access the news</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8: Significant differences between phone and PC web use

Downloading individual media files such as music tracks, ringtones, videos and images is a popular activity, mentioned by 33% of participants in relation to their daily mobile web use, and by 28% in relation to their daily PC web use (‘yesterday’). This mode of interaction with individual media files is also reflected in the prevalence of Bluetooth file transfers for peer-to-peer sharing of media files, which is an extremely popular form of cost-free networking. Of the m4Lit participants, 62% reported...
that they had previously transferred files between phones, while 41% said that they had transferred files from their phone ‘yesterday’.

**Figure 10: Long-term online activities (‘ever’) by participants (%) on phone and computer (n=61)**

Figure 10 shows the distribution of online activities or opportunities in which mLit teens have participated in over the long term (‘ever’). While the emphasis is broadly comparable to their reported daily activities, there are some statistically significant differences. Notably, phones are more strongly associated with downloading media, significantly more so than computers are (P=0.0000007). Computers seem to be more strongly associated with researching information for school than phones are, since significantly more teens recalled ‘ever’ using computers (59%) than phones (38%) to research information for school (P=0.00001). Nonetheless, a comparison with Table 9 suggests that educational uses of the Internet occur infrequently, given the far lower figures of participants who mentioned doing school research ‘yesterday’ (16% on both phones and computers).

**Favourite websites**

In the first survey (n=61), participants were asked to list three of their favourite websites. All the sites they mentioned are listed in Figure 11. As shown in Table 9, most did not mention more than two sites (68.8%). Just under a third mentioned three favourites. About a quarter did not name a single site (26.2%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is your favourite website - Number of sites mentioned</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>31.1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 9: Number of favourite websites mentioned by participants (n=61)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What is the name of your favourite website?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Google</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MXIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zanmob/waptrick</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abphone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yahoo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napster or variant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wikipedia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>y8 (or 48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hotmail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pirate bay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the grid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>tegas.ru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mweb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ping</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>webmail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>zonke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allhiphop.com</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 11: Favourite websites (number of times mentioned, n=61)

Figure 11 shows that Google was the site favoured by most participants (it was mentioned by 26 participants). The next most popular site was MXit, which has both a website and a mobisite (used to download the java application). Since most did not provide a URL, it is not clear which version they meant.

Facebook made an appearance in third position, a new arrival which did not feature prominently a year previously when a similar question was asked in Kreutzer’s Generation Mobile study (2009). A couple of media download portals appear in fourth and fifth place, along with global web portal Yahoo. All of the wap download portals are adapted for mobile access, and offer free downloads of mobile media (including plenty of porn and mp3s of dubious origins).
**DISCUSSION - CELLPHONE ACCESS AND MOBILE-CENTRIC WEB USE**

For most of our target group, digital writing takes place primarily on mobile phones. Computer use is intermittent and seems to rely on public access (school or library) rather than home access for the majority of teens. In contrast, mobile phones and MXit are pervasive. When digital texts are created or read, they tend to be short texts on mobile phones – SMS and MXit messages, used primarily in dyadic conversations rather than as a form of publication.

There was more evidence of digital reading (browsing the web) on computers than of word processing or other computer-based writing. Nonetheless, while reading or browsing the web was more common than writing online, browsing is often in the service of downloading discrete clips of media, or effectively ‘delinking’ them from the web so that they can be passed around and shared with peers. While face to face discussion and conversation around media takes place as clips or tracks are downloaded and shared, this is somewhat different to the online ‘conversational’ mode of interaction which characterises Web2.0 and participatory media (Jenkins et al., 2006).

Although ‘mobile’ communication is often defined as a state of ‘anyplace anytime’ availability, as Ureta (2008) points out, impoverished communities do not enjoy unfettered mobility. Additionally, social norms and other situational factors mean that cellphones are often not as mobile as the people who carry them. This is particularly the case with teens, whose use of cellphones is regulated by authorities, both at school and at home, and is further restricted by the fact that web-enabled cellphones are valuable and portable consumer objects which expose their owners to being targeted in muggings.

Teens compensate for limitations on access by sharing phones, which thus do not function entirely as they do in wealthier contexts as quintessentially individual devices. Relatively high levels of shared phone use have several implications. Most importantly perhaps, the ‘privacy’ safeguards in mobile applications are often designed around the assumption that a single phone is used by a single individual. In this way, for example, teens are able to raid one another’s phones in search of the phone numbers of other MXit users so that they can expand their circle of contacts, a common occurrence, as will be discussed below, despite MXit’s assurances that privacy can be protected by not revealing contact details to strangers. In more subtle ways, shared use also changes the context of communication, and a slightly more public context may have important effects on activities and interfaces which, in other contexts, are usually imagined as private texts or solitary activities.

Participants used the web on both their phones and on their computers, although they use their phones more often. Daily web use on phones is significantly higher than daily web use on computers, suggesting that the greater accessibility of phones makes a big difference. Beyond this
improved accessibility and opportunities for daily use, having access to a web-enabled phone does not appear to expand the range of daily opportunities for web use for this group, since use of the mobile internet was not associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in multiple kinds of online activities on any particular day, or at least not those which were the focus of this study. It is apparent that desktop computer and mobile internet are not alternative ways of using the web, since many participants in this study use both phones and computers for most kinds of daily web activities. They do seem to prefer using phones to access news and Facebook, and are more likely to visit movie websites on their computers than on their phones.

Beyond improved accessibility for daily use, having access to a web-enabled phone does not appear to expand the range of opportunities for web use on any particular day, since use of the mobile internet is not associated with an increased likelihood of engaging in multiple online activities on any particular day.

Search, social networks, and wap media portals make up the mobile web experience for most of these participants, with Facebook playing an increasingly important role. The rapid growth in popularity of Facebook since 2008 suggests that it may begin to present significant competition to MXit among this age group. These mobile-centric media use practices also have important implications for the future of the South African media industry. The absence of South African online publishers from the teens’ lists of favourite websites is striking, although this is not the case on MXit, which is dominated by South African brands. It is possible that many teens are not aware of the sites linked in Google’s search results as separate entities. The fact that participants are more likely to access Facebook and the news via their phones, and that none of South Africa’s conventional online publishers were included among their favourite websites suggests ongoing processes of globalisation at work in the mobile space.

The levels of access to the web and online media are startling, if one considers that, before 2004 South African teens without home access to a computer and internet connection would have had no web access at all (few schools were connected at that stage). The current levels of access reported by the m4Lit participants are comparable to, if not higher than those of many of the teenaged participants in Livingstone and Helsper’s (2007) national sample in the UK, where only 41% were daily Internet users. The limited repertoire of mobile internet activities in which most m4Lit participants engage complicates the comparison somewhat.

Mobile portals with free media downloads were among the most popular sites for this group, usually mentioned after Google and the social network sites MXit and Facebook. When discussing their media use on the previous day, participants mentioned using cost-free bluetooth peer-to-peer file transfers almost as many times as they mentioned using the web. This can be explained by their
limited budgets for airtime and for buying clips, but also suggests the collaborative sociality around media use for these mobile phone users.

The m4Lit participants associate downloading media with phones, rather than computers, and this ‘delinked’ mode of interacting with media characterises their mobile-centric Internet use. The popularity of downloading, accessing and bluetooth transfer of individual media files may be a mode of interacting with media which distinguishes the mobile-centric web use of teens in this context from desktop web use elsewhere. In addition, it suggests a mode of interaction with media somewhat different to the participation in expansive hyperlinked online spaces described by Jenkins et al. (2006).

In terms of the scale used to measure digital inclusion in the UK, most of these South African teens are receiving their introduction to the Internet through instant messaging and music downloads (for offline sharing with peers via Bluetooth) rather than starting with information-seeking and email or social networking sites. This suggests that future studies could compare local gradations of activity in terms of Livingstone & Helsper’s (2007) distinction between ‘basic’, ‘moderate’, ‘broad’ and ‘allround’ use, and investigate whether the ‘ladder’ of online opportunities might look different for mobile-centric users in this particular context, as might routes to digital inclusion.

Computers seem to be more strongly associated with researching information for school, but on an infrequent basis - educational uses of the Internet do not feature strongly in reports of participants’ daily web activities. Although Google is the most popular website used by this group, it is not necessarily associated with school or the classroom. Phones were considered disruptive of school by most participants, and many felt that they should be banned. Only one participant cited easier access to information on phones when arguing that they should be allowed at school.

Adapting social environments through messaging

The m4Lit participants had a strong sense of situations in which it was more or less appropriate or usual for them to send instant messages on MXit or to send SMSes. In the first survey (n=61), teens were asked whether they customarily used MXit or sent SMSes in particular situations, and their responses are reported in Figure 7. As is the case with all the survey questions, these answers may not reflect their actual practices, but are nonetheless likely to reflect their sense of ideal or socially acceptable behaviour.

As indicated by Figure 12, most participants agreed that they were ‘often’ involved in messaging when they were alone (80.3%), when watching TV (70.5%), or when with friends (68.9%). Very few said that they would ‘never’ use MXit or send SMSes in these situations, and thus there seems to be a
consensus that, in these circumstances, messaging is socially acceptable (A minority, or 24.6% indicated that they were somewhat reluctant to send messages while with friends). While social interactions with peers could be interrupted by messaging, there was less consensus about other social contexts. A majority said that they ‘often’ used messaging while using public transport (59%) or with family (54%). About 10% said that they ‘never’ used messaging while with family, with 34.4% reporting that their use of messaging in family situations was infrequent ‘not so often’. In the case of public transport 36.1% said that they ‘never’ (23%) or ‘not so often’ (13.1%) used MXit or SMS in that situation.

![Chart showing acceptable situations for mobile messaging](chart.png)

**Figure 12: Acceptable situations for mobile messaging (n=61)**

As described above, cellphones are outlawed at certain schools, but 41% of the m4Lit participants reported that they ‘often’ use messaging at school, when outside of class, although 24.6% said that they would never do so. A large majority (65.6%) agreed that they would ‘never’ use messaging while they were actually in class at school, and only 8.2% reported ‘often’ messaging in that situation, although 19.7% admitted that they did so occasionally (‘not so often’). Thus being in class, at school is a situation with a strong (although not universal) social consensus against the use of messaging.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Other situation/places for messaging</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Home</td>
<td>26.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bedroom</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Participants were also asked to mention other places and situations where they often used messaging. The top five situations they mentioned are reported in Table 10, many of which were private spaces such as the home, their bedrooms or (in one case) the toilet. Public places such as town or the mall were also mentioned, with several references to queues, and even two mentions of church.

### Table 10: Other places and situations for text messaging (mentions, n=61)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Mentions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town/mall</td>
<td>11.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queues</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>3.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Designing social networks with MXit and Facebook

Prior experience in using MXit (the most popular mobile instant messaging client in South Africa) was taken as an index of mobile internet access and was used in recruiting participants for m4Lit. For this reason it is not surprising that 95.1% of the sample reported having used MXit before, while 75% said that they had used it ‘yesterday’. In Kreutzer’s 2008 survey, 67% of the sample (somewhat older students than the m4Lit cohort) reported that they had used MXit before, while 47% were active users who said that they had used it ‘yesterday’. As Table 10 indicates, the m4Lit participants included a higher proportion of MXit users than the Generation Mobile sample did, and thus our sample may be more likely to use MXit than their peers. The difference may also reflect an increase in MXit registrations since 2008, since MXit staff currently report 15 million registered users in South Africa, up from 13 million in 2009 (Laura Hallam, 2009, personal communication, 14 August), and 6.5 million South African users in April 2008 (Vanek, 2008, 16 April).

In the second survey (n=50), which took place closer to exam time, only 50% of students had used MXit ‘yesterday’, and 18% did not currently have MXit installed on their phone because they had deleted it (see Figure 14). Limiting MXit use, whether by self-control, because of parental fiat or by deleting it off the phone completely was a common way of managing MXit use, particularly during exam time.
Current access to MXit on own phone - % (n=50)

MXit plays an important part in social interaction for this peer group, and the M4Lit participants appeared to be relatively well integrated – in the second survey, 60% said that they had ‘never’ or only ‘rarely’ felt left out by their peers because of MXit. The remainder who answered that question had felt left out ‘often’ (11%) or ‘rarely’ (16%), and one remarked ‘one has to have MXit. The m4Lit participants may also use MXit more intensively than their peers do, as reported in Table 10. Students who had used MXit on the previous day reported in Kreutzer’s study that they had used MXit for an average of 100.2 minutes (SD 152.56). The m4Lit participants who had used MXit on the previous day reported spending considerably longer than this, on average. The 20 participants who answered this question reported that they had spent about four hours using MXit on the previous day (mean = 221.89 minutes [SD=158.72], median = 180 minutes). Participants in the m4Lit study were also asked to estimate the number of ‘contacts’ (friends) they had on MXit, and the median estimate was 30. (Only 23 participants responded to this question.) There was wide variance in these estimates, with some students estimating that they had 250 or 280 MXit contacts.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you used MXit?</th>
<th>Survey</th>
<th>Ever</th>
<th>Yesterday</th>
<th>Mean time used (min)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kreutzer (n=413)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>100.2</td>
<td>(SD=152.56)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m4Lit (n=61)</td>
<td>95.1</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>221.89</td>
<td>(SD=158.72)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 11: Have you used MXit? Responses from Kreutzer (2009) and m4Lit participants

Figure 15 shows the popularity of MXit in relation to other mobile internet applications, although Facebook’s second place suggests a rapid growth in popularity. In comparison to Kreutzer (2009), this sample showed a much stronger awareness of Facebook, which is growing rapidly in South Africa, which is often mentioned in the mass media, and which can be accessed either by computer or by mobile phone. In the 2008 survey, only 20% of respondents had created a profile on
either Facebook or MySpace. Among the m4Lit respondents, 59% had used Facebook on their phones, while 37.7 reported that they had used it on the previous day.

Figure 14: Use of mobile IM, email and social networking applications, yesterday and ever (% n=61)

Figure 15 also indicates that, in addition to MXit, participants have tried out a range of other mobile applications for instant messaging, email and social networking (on average, they report having used more than four ‘ever’ - mean = 4.5, SD=2.57). Fewer of these applications are actively used, with respondents reporting that they had used an average of two different applications on the previous day.

When participants in the second survey (n=50) were asked who had taught them about MXit (Figure 16), the vast majority reported that they had learned to use MXit from friends (80.9%). Almost all mentioned that they had needed help when learning how to download (72%) and register (68%) with the application. A majority had received help in learning how to use ‘MXit language’ (54%), and in finding new contacts (52%).
Social Networking

In the second survey (n=50), participants were asked to estimate how many of their contacts on MXit were family, close friends, acquaintances, or MXit friends known only from using MXit and so on (summarised in Figure 10). Not one of the m4Lit participants reported having a parent on their contact list.

Instead, the teenaged participants used MXit to support their stronger ties with siblings (mean=3, median=2) and a small number of close friends (mean=7, median=5). A minority (20%) reported having 10 or more ‘close’ friends on their contact list. In addition, contact lists were extended by the inclusion of larger groups of acquaintances, and friends of friends on their lists. Friends known only from MXit made up one of the largest single categories on participants’ contact list but this was also the grouping with the widest levels of variance (mean=22, median=14, SD=33).

In many cases, participants appear to have been using MXit to get to know a couple of ‘potential’ love interests (mean=6, median=2), although some outliers reported that they had their eye on up to 64 of their contacts. Most reported using MXit to communicate with one ‘current’ boyfriend or girlfriend, although some claimed to have as many as 6 ‘current’ partners on their contact list at the time.

### How many … on your contact list?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Median</th>
<th>SD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In another question, participants \( n=50 \) were asked what proportion of their contacts belonged to various categories (see Table 12). Over 80\% of participants reported that either ‘most ’ (46\%) or ‘quite a few’ (38\%) of their MXit contacts either lived in their neighbourhood or went to the same school. A similar proportion shared the same home language with their contacts – they reported that ‘quite a few’ (22\%) or ‘most’ (58\%) spoke the same language as they did. A smaller majority of participants (56\%) reported that most of their contacts had told them they were ‘black’. This does not necessarily mean that large numbers of township teens are networking across racial boundaries – teens noted that although their contacts had not said that they were black, this could nonetheless be inferred from their mixed language use (isiXhosa and English). Still, a minority of participants reported that ‘most’ (14\%) or ‘quite a few’ (22\%) of their MXit contacts had told them that they were ‘white’, ‘coloured’ or ‘Indian’. (This more cosmopolitan minority may be the group of participants who attend former Model C schools which charge higher school fees and are likely to be attended by a larger percentage of the wealthier racial minorities.)

Beyond these primary social networks, a majority of participants (56\%) also use MXit extensively for social networking, or to meet new people, which is also indicated by the relatively large group of friends known only from MXit on their contact lists. These participants said that ‘quite a few’ (42\%) or ‘most’ (14\%) of their contacts were only known to them from MXit. (A somewhat smaller group (32\%) reported that they knew most of their contacts in person, or that that ‘hardly any’ were unknown to them.) Despite this interest in meeting new people, most teens seem to limit their contact with older MXit users – 36\% reported that ‘none’ of their contacts were more than five years older than they were, while a relatively small minority said that ‘most’ (2\%) or ‘quite a few’ (22\%) of their contacts were more than five years older. Almost all (82\%) said that ‘none’ of their contacts were married. Many participants (66\%) reported that ‘most’ or ‘quite a few’ of their contacts were from other cities.
in South Africa, while 50% stated that ‘none’ of their contacts came from rural areas. Over three quarters (76%) said that ‘none’ of their MXit contacts were from other countries.

A majority of participants said that they ‘never’ (32%) or ‘rarely’ (14%) participated in MXit chatrooms.

When asked what the best places were to find or meet new MXit contacts, most participants preferred to use their primary offline networks at school or via friends (see Figure 18). In addition to sharing contacts with friends, high levels of shared phone use makes it easy to raid contacts from a friend’s installation of MXit. This is a relatively common occurrence, and 58% of the participants in the second survey (n=50) reported that they had at some stage experienced their contacts being ‘stolen’ in this way, while 12% said that it had happened to them ‘often’. Most (62%) said that their school or their friends were the best ways to be introduced to new MXit contacts, while a smaller group (22%) meet new contacts in their neighbourhood or church. A minority preferred to use digital methods of meeting new people such as Facebook, MXit chatrooms, or the MXit personal ads (MultiMX). (The group (8%) who identified ‘public places’ may have misunderstood the question and be referring to malls as safe places for the first meeting with a hitherto unknown MXit contact.)

When asked what they talked about on MXit yesterday, more than a quarter (27%) answered that they discussed what happened at school and schoolwork, while 9% gossiped, or talked about other friends (see Figure 19). As in the case of the teens studied by Lewis and Fabos (2005), a good proportion (37%) of MXit IM focused on heterosexual romance, courtship, sexuality and relationships.
Discussions also focused on shared interests, and church, choirs, and sport were also mentioned by several (14%).

![Figure 17: Topics of discussion on MXit - mentions (n=50)](image)

**RULES OF MIXING**

Teens who participated in the second survey (n=50) were asked whether they had any rules for themselves which they used to regulate their MXit use (see Figure 20). In most cases (16 mentions) they said that they limited the length of time spent on MXit, or that they protected their time for studying, with a few saying that they did not use MXit at all, or that they deleted it during the exam period."

The rules which teens mentioned were often designed to limit their interaction with contacts unknown outside MXit, with 10 saying that they limited the range of interactions that they had with strangers (e.g. never agreeing to meet them face to face), or that they they did not interact with them at all on MXit.
Other rules that a minority of teens cited referred to the need to limit their emotional involvement in MXit events, and not take what happens on MXit too seriously, while some placed personal bans on using MXit in certain social settings such as school or church, on exchanging pictures with their contacts, or on chatting to contacts who used foul language.

Participants in the second survey (n=50) were asked whether they had experienced conflict with their parents because of their cellphone or MXit use, and a large majority (76%) reported that they had experienced such conflicts.

Parental concerns about late nights (64%), neglected schoolwork (62%) and household chores (50%) featured strongly as causes of inter-generational conflict over cellphone or MXit use, as indicated in Figure 21. Less commonly cited reasons for conflict included the influence of MXit or phones on teens’ interactions in the home, with parents responding negatively to teens’ distance towards those around them (44%), or to their lack of responsiveness or obedience to parents (36%). Concerns about the cost of cellphone use were reported as causing conflict with parents for 38% of participants. Only a minority of participants reported that their parents were concerned about the issues which receive most media attention, such as teens keeping bad company (24%), or about the harmful effects of MXit spelling (22%).
Describing the kind of language used on MXit, participants described it as ‘shortening of words’, ‘shorthand’ or ‘shortened language’, or ‘words that make it easier to communicate’. The participants each contributed their ‘favourite’ example of MXit language (see Appendix 1) and were asked if there were any MXit ‘words’ which they did not understand. Only one ‘first timer’ to MXit admitted not having much knowledge of the MXit lexicon, and being a bit confused as a result.

Figure 22 indicates that the overwhelming majority (80%) of m4Lit participants (n=50) reported that they ‘never’ or ‘rarely’ used MXit language when writing for school. Those who admitted that they had occasionally or rarely used MXit spelling for schoolwork were at pains to tell the interviewer that it was a temporary lapse, that they had immediately corrected themselves, and that they always avoided such errors as it would result in an immediate penalty in their grades.
A MXit lexicon was compiled from participants' lists of their favourite MXit phrases and is reproduced in Appendix 1.

**REPRESENTING SELF AND OTHERS**

In the second survey (n=50), we asked participants to tell us their name (‘nic’ or ‘handle’) on MXit and to explain why they had chosen that name, as reported in Figure 23.

A minority of participants (12%) used their own name on MXit. A smaller group (20%) used a nickname which is known to themselves and a small group of friends, but which allows them to preserve their anonymity in the broader circle of contacts that they develop.

![Figure 21: Reasons for choosing MXit names (n=50)](image)

The rest of the participants who answered this question (58%) all used a pseudonym, chosen to reveal something about themselves, or to ascribe some quality to themselves – either a particular characteristic, such as shyness or viciousness, sometimes in combination with a clue to their gender, (e.g. ‘bashful babe’ or ‘vicious’).

Most of the participants in the second survey (n=50) reported that they had a profile picture on MXit (31 participants). Of this group, 52% had pictures of themselves, most often wearing everyday clothing or school clothes (see Figure 24). Almost half of those with profile pictures (49%) used a picture which disguised their identity to some extent, either partially, by depicting themselves in sunglasses (7%) or by using a different picture entirely (42%).
Designing navigation in social networks

Participants in the second survey (n=51) were asked to draw a diagram or mindmap of the different ‘groups’ of contacts on their contact list. These diagrams reflected the way in which participants had customized their MXit chat interface using the functionality MXit provides to categorize and organize lists of contacts into folders or ‘groups’. As such, they constitute a kind of ‘folksonomy’ or informal categorisation of the teens’ MXit social networks. This categorization is used in MXit to navigate and organize their lists of contacts (some of which were very lengthy), but also to ‘read’ or frame the messages that they receive from their contacts.

For example, in Figure 25, the (male) participant showed us his lists of MXit contacts, which he had divided into categories for Ama boyz, Ama Galz, and MXit crew (where he had subscribed to what he termed ‘channels’, or content optimized for mobile provided by local sports pay television channel, Supersport).
These groupings were analysed and coded according to the most common social distinctions expressed through participant categorizations (see Figure 26). While a number of the groups (34%) were defined idiosyncratically, most could be interpreted, and were coded as explained below. Most teens’ folksonomies for their contacts centred around some kind of gender distinction. Almost all (98%) of participants provided at least one category for female contacts, while 84% identified their male contacts separately. As the Wordle graphical representation indicates (see Figure 27), most categories for male contacts were a variant of ‘amajita’ (township slang for ‘gent’). A more recent version of this label, with connotations of rough, gangster masculinity (amarhuzu) was also very popular. A wider range of labels referred to female contacts, with categories such as amamedi, amaCherry and amalady present in many diagrams. A whole range of other terms established additional distinctions between female contacts, such as those between ‘sweet gals’ oocuties (cuties), ‘my chicks’, ama rhuzukazi (rough girls or gangsters’ girls), Iziqova (older girls), ‘sexy ladies’, ‘play gals’, ‘hot gals’ or ‘good hoes’. Fewer such terms were provided to describe male contacts, although some individuals had categories for ixhegs (older men), ezomnotho (rich ones), and ‘hunks’ or ‘hot guys’.

Figure 23: Categories of contacts (‘groups’) in participants’ MXit interface.
### MXit contacts - user groupings (% - n=50)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Participants using categorisation (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Place</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Derogatory</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Close friends</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affinity</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mxit friends</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>People (general)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/idiomatic</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 24: Categorisations used to organise MXit contact lists - ('groups')*

Additional categories were present for family, various categories of friends, for contacts known from an interest group such as church or an art group, and for friends known only from MXit.

### Figure 25: Graphical representation of MXit contact groups, created using Wordle (http://www.wordle.net/).
Another central organizational dimension in the diagrams relates to place, or the physical location of contacts - contacts who come from a particular place are grouped together, with ‘school mates’ the most popular category here. Many participants also included categories for contacts from Langa (skomline) or from the township ‘Abase Kasie’ or from a particular school.

Finally, several derogatory (or potentially derogatory) categories are present:

    Mxit Crap, Mxit Kaka, Mxit Shit

These were groupings used to label the media content provided by MXit. Other labels marked undesirable contacts – the labels suggest that they were considered too new, nerdish, unimportant, or (most often) too boring to warrant attention.

    New Members, Nobodys, nerdz, ndiyadika (boring ones), Haïybo Niyadika (oh man you are boring), Boring, uneeded, unknown viruses, Onon-important (non-important ones),

**DISCUSSION - DESIGNING SOCIAL SITUATIONS AND NETWORKS**

As discussed above, mobile phone communication for many mobile phone users in South Africa is characterised by intensive networking which maintains a small number of strong ties. MXit’s more affordable model of communication seems to allow teens who participated in the m4Lit study to adapt their social situation through mobile communication, since they appear to use it to stay in contact with close friends, while also developing relatively extensive social networks.

Mobile technologies extend the social situation or surroundings in that ‘an individual’s environment of communicative possibilities’ can now encompass distant places and people connected through mediated communication (Jones, 2002). The m4Lit participants showed awareness of the ways in which they could, or should reconfigure various everyday social situations through the use of literacy in text messaging and MXit use. Their experience of conflict with their parents and their own need to design rules to limit their MXit use suggests that these new possibilities for reshaping their world and reorganising their days (and nights) through the use of mobile communication is not always easy for them to manage.

The problems associated with text messaging in certain contexts, most notably in the classroom, suggest that messaging is perceived as an ‘involvement screen’ (Scollon, 2001) and as a transgressive infringement of the norms of communication for that particular situation. This is suggested by the large number of teens who claimed that they would ‘never’ use messaging in the classroom or, to a much lesser extent, when with their family. Thus despite the ‘muted’ mode of text
communication (Jones, 2002) the kinds of screening which go along with texting and which are used to construct ‘alternative’ social contexts may be perceived as disrespectful to others or disruptive of shared activities in that space.

Different meanings, uses and norms of texting appear to prevail when teens are messaging with friends, where social gatherings appear to be flexible enough to allow for participants to step back from the physical meeting to focus on a MXit chat, or to encompass the virtual involvement of new participants via messaging, as when Japanese teens augment ‘flesh meets’ by texting with absent friends (Ito and Okabe 2006:271), thus broadening the group’s communicative context. Teens are thus using literacy to expand communicative possibilities and design new social surroundings.

This study thus confirms that MXit is an environment which teens use to communicate with an extensive South African network, which centres on their closest friends and a local peer group, but which entirely excludes their parents. MXit networks seem to to develop from teens’ existing school or neighbourhood networks, and thus play an important role in strengthening the strong ties in teens’ social networks, although primarily in the peer group.

In a departure from the norm of mobile communication in many other contexts, South African teens who use MXit seem to be motivated to expand their horizons through networking beyond a circle of close friends, and MXit provides them with opportunities to use the mobile internet (rather than SMS) to do so. This interest does not generally extend to meeting members of the older generation. MXit is used to extend the network by adding new weak ties, particularly with an eye to future romantic interactions, and allows teens to chat with new and existing contacts from other urban areas in South Africa. Unlike PC-based internet access or applications such as Facebook, MXit is less useful for making global connections with people from other countries. It is also used less often for networking with people in rural areas in South Africa, particularly those who are not already known to the user.

Mobile literacy thus allows teens a low-cost way of maintaining and building new social ties with peers. Managing new opportunities for networking brings with it the need to regulate use, with face to face meetings with strangers seen as a risk by many.

Categorizations and teen folksonomies of their MXit contacts indicate the ways in which teens reconfigure virtual spaces for mediated communication into recognizable social situations. The m4Lit participants used MXit ‘groups’ to navigate and organize their lists of contacts (some of which were very lengthy), but also in deciding how and whether to allocate their attention to various types of contacts, and how to ‘read’ or frame the messages that they receive from their contacts. These categorisations, like those used by teens in the Lewis and Fabos (2005) study, inscribe the IM application with the social specifics of their surroundings. By allocating these identities to their
contacts, teens are framing their online interactions within recognisable social conventions, including normative ideas about gender and heterosexuality.

Another way in which teens configure their social environment is through the use of language and textisms. The genres of writing which are used for school are linguistically and orthographically differentiated from the written forms used to mark other social contexts, where MXit language is considered appropriate (or, as will be discussed in the following section, mandatory). For the m4Lit participants, this social and linguistic divide is marked by a change in medium, since composing digital texts on the phone is considered a linguistically distinct activity from writing with a pen or pencil and paper (still the dominant medium at school). As one teen explained to the interviewer: 'when I am ‘with a pen’ then it is strictly the correct English vocabulary'.

The MXit lexicon (Appendix 1) reveals the existence of some common literacy events associated with MXit use, or ‘mixing’. Certain phrases are used often enough for them to be abbreviated as an ‘initialism’ (a phrase concentrated into a highly abbreviated ‘word’) which suggests that the abbreviations are both highly useful, and also an expected part of interaction.

Thus for example, ‘WUD’ is part of a literacy event where interlocutors use MXit chat to enquire into and share the contexts of their mobile communication (this is necessary since they are in different physical spaces, and are invisible to one another). When asked ‘WUD’, interlocutors often reply ‘L2M’ (‘listening to music’), ‘JC’ (‘just chilling’) or ‘lib’ (‘lying in bed’) to suggest that they are not doing anything important, and are free to chat. Other formulaic inquiries and responses are often focused on partings, such as ‘G2G’ (‘got to go’), longing (‘I C I CN B2 C2U’ or ‘I wish I can be too close to you’), meeting again (‘CU2Nite’ – ‘see you tonight’), or laughter, which includes several local variants of global standards, such as ‘LMFAO’, which participants expanded as ‘laugh my fat ass out’.

The use of writing and images to mark, create, and reveal individual identity is also glimpsed in the use of MXit usernames and profile pictures. Social networks such as Facebook depend on users providing their real names, and have default privacy settings which mean that most users reveal their social networks to their friends and to anyone in their networks. In contrast, the MXit interface does not make social networks public, and most users choose a ‘nic’ or pseudonym as their username. In addition, MXit lifestyle encourages users not to reveal personal details to their contacts.

The usernames chosen by m4Lit participants suggest that many are taking steps to protect their privacy, while ensuring that they are still able to reveal their identity to their closest friends. Thus their individual identity must be negotiated with new contacts and weak ties, while it is freely accessible to close friends.
Similar processes appear to be taking place through visual communication, in particular through the use of profile pictures. As Jones (2002) points out, pictures reveal identity in a very different way to words. While the writer can control which aspects of themselves they wish to reveal or represent in words, photographs can inadvertently ‘give off’ a great deal of information to the viewer, who might discover (for example) that ‘viciouss’ looks about twelve years old.

Although pictorial representations can be manipulated in various ways, the information in a photograph is not always under the control of the person being photographed, and this is particularly true for mobile phone users. For this reason, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, the exchange of photographs among the m4Lit participants appeared to be associated with a genre of particularly complex negotiations, which established a distinct set of asymmetrical power relations, where the participant who offered a photograph for scrutiny by the other opened themselves to rejection and was in a less powerful position. (The dynamics of this genre of interaction became particularly apparent from the focus groups, discussed in Chapter 6 below.)

The existence of this power differential and the associated genre may explain the fact that few participants had profile pictures, while those who did have one often chose to hide their identity. Thus many profile pictures functioned more like an avatar, while access to actual photographs had to be negotiated by chat partners.

Teens are not only reconfiguring their physical surroundings, and framing their online interactions in MXit, but are also moving between a range of different mobile internet applications. The four most popular mobile internet applications used by the m4Lit participants all have slightly different functions and strengths – MXit has the advantage of a large installed user base, but its interface emphasizes privacy, and does not facilitate online social networking (meeting new contacts). Facebook provides user generated content, groups defined around shared interests, and a more open approach to social networking, but may be more expensive in terms of bandwidth. Gmail provides an email address, which is necessary for signing up to services such as Facebook (teens do not appear to do much emailing), while 2Go has an interface which facilitates social networking or meeting new people online, in that it allows larger groups to chat in themed and location-specific mobile chatrooms.

These different applications all configure writing, multimodality, and access to social networks differently, and only some grant teens the right to write for, interact with and publish to broader audiences than the small circle of their existing contacts. Mobile applications also differ in the extent to which they allow users to decide how to protect their own privacy, to find likeminded people among broader audiences or to join networks aligned with their own particular interests (Walton and
Donner, 2009). For example, Facebook affords a very different set of ‘writing-rights’ (Kress, 1994:21) to its users than MXit does, by allowing them to engage in online publication of short status updates, comments, longer notes and wall posts, and by allowing them to connect with others who share their interests. This has several important implications for teens’ experiences of literacy, and for the genres of written communication that they are likely to encounter online.

Public discussion and regulation tends to focus on the privacy and safety of mobile applications for teens. Since these mobile internet applications all have different architectures by which they regulate social interactions and ‘writing-rights’, one might also ask a set of different questions about them, such as to what extent it is possible for teens to shape social activities within the application (who takes on a role of ownership within the space)? Or are they relegated to being users, who participate in the channel only under conditions of clienthood? (Here I have adapted a framework for multilingualism suggested by Blommaert et al., 2005).

While teens are active in selecting the social networking applications and writing environments they inhabit, these choices are strongly driven by their need to connect with peers, and by the informal support and motivation they receive from a peer group when adopting a new application. The extent of peer learning which was necessary when teens adopted MXit has several implications for projects such as m4Lit, which conceptualise their users as individuals, rather than as members of social networks which can exercise strong gravitational power and allow for peer learning. Such projects attempt to attract teens to experiment with new techniques (such as registering for a mobile social network), using web interfaces, or participating in literacy practices with which they are unfamiliar (such as ‘commenting’). Since the web constitutes a new technology and literacy practice for most users, projects such as m4Lit which attempt to entice teens away from MXit may struggle to get off the ground without incentivising participation or without ensuring the strong support of a peer group and community of practice of other users.
6. DESIGNING SOCIAL INTERFACES

Two focus group discussions conducted separately with male and female teens allowed a more in-depth investigation of some of the social meanings associated with mobile literacy, and with MXit use in particular.

The diagrams and folksonomies discussed above revealed how teens use MXit as a social interface to design representations of their peer networks. The focus group discussions revealed how literacy events associated with inviting new contacts (endi-invayifha), deleting unwanted contacts (ndi-dilitha) and surveillance of existing contacts are also used to develop this social interface. A key aspect of this ongoing design process involves getting to know new potential contacts, and filtering out those who are not considered acceptable.

Mnda ndingakudilitha any time (I can delete you anytime)
‘Deleting’ a contact was mentioned many times by participants who recounted their rationales for deleting someone from their list, and sharing their experiences when on the receiving end of this somewhat aggressive act of social erasure. MXit contacts were deleted for being too ugly, for belonging to the wrong age group or gender, or for verbal aggression such as ‘flaming’, threatening, or trash talking.

We asked teens what they look for when they first meet a contact. Male and female teens responded quite differently to this question. The male teens talked about various surveillance tactics, such as needing to check the age and gender of potential contacts, and then going beyond basic demographic information to find out more about their social networks (their crowd and with whom they went to school). They watched interactions carefully for signs of potential threats, noting how a simple request for information could be answered in a way that suggested that a contact was connected to potentially dangerous people (‘abarongo’ – wrong ones):

Mhlawumbi uyambuza uhlaphi akuxelele ke ngoku ngengingqi yakhe uba uhlala kweningi ethile apho kukho obani bani noobani bani abarongo.
Maybe you ask someone where he is staying, instead of telling you where he stays, he tells you about the bad people who are staying in that area.

Another key consideration for the male teens was to check their new contact’s ‘nehrhesi’ (face or picture) since the physical appearance of their contacts was an important criterion for further
interaction. Contacts who were not suitably attractive met the ultimate fate of social ignominy and erasure in the digital age – ‘deletion’:

*Uba mbi kufuneka acounte herself as deleted, uba mbi.*
*If she is ugly, she must count herself as deleted.*

Here the male teens represented their social interactions as a game of strategy, where careful footwork was used to nudge the potential contact into revealing her appearance without revealing their own (and thus risking rejection).

The male teens were also concerned that a misunderstanding on MXit might erupt into overt threats of violence – since many contacts are known to one another from school or the neighbourhood, there is a possibility that a MXit conflict might become an argument or physical confrontation.

While female participants focused on hurtful gossip when recounting their worst experiences on MXit, verbal aggression and genres which resemble ‘flaming’ or ‘trash talking’ featured more strongly for the males.

*Nyani kuthi gqi umntu noba uthetha like nje into ezakumcaphukisa kancinci gqi sekuthuka ngomama wakho akakwazi nomama wakho akamazi, ngoku sekuthuka ke ngoku ngomama wakho uba hayi—I mean umama wakho like la mntu akamazi umama wakho uyabona, athi gqi semthuka yena ethetha izinto ezi-negative about yena lo mama wakho.*
Yes there are some people maybe you say something that maybe irritates him a little bit and he loses it and starts swearing at your mother, and he doesn’t even know your mother and then he starts saying negative things about your mother.

This is another area where the teens assert their control of the channel of communication, and report that they respond to threats or violent talk by deleting the offending contact:

*Uyabona ndiya-dilitha , kaloku ankanakundithretnisha ephonini yam, ndiyamdilitha, xa ephinda endi-invayitha ndimyeke ndimjonge nje.*
You see I delete, because he can’t threaten me on my phone, I delete him, and when he invites me again, I just ignore him.

The males said that they avoided meeting with unknown male contacts, and even much-desired face-to-face meetings with female MXit contacts were seen as a potential trap. One participant expressed concern that the first meeting with a MXit contact might turn ugly, with females used as bait by a crowd of armed *namajita* (gents, or gangsters):
Kanti ume namajita akhe ekoneni ekherile sekubalwe ngawesi uqal’ukuthi gqi.
Only to find out she is standing with her guys in the corner, and they are armed and they had set a trap for you.

In contrast, while the male teens pursued attractive females, guarding against potential threats of violence, the female teens emphasized the need to defend themselves against undesired sexual attentions from strangers.

While some participants in the girls’ focus group insisted that they never accept invitations to chat to strangers, this protective impulse ran counter to their desire to expand their social circle, mainly their desire to meet more potential boyfriends, or to increase their popularity with the opposite sex. Given these contradictory motives, female teens develop a repertoire of strategies for ‘sussing out’ likely contacts, similar to those employed by the males, though with a different goal in mind. They too use surveillance strategies to read information such as age, gender and so on on MXit profiles. In the focus group with teenaged girls, one participant said that she refused invitations from female contacts who were unknown to her. She would accept invitations from males, as long as their profile stated that they were in a suitable age group:

**uba mhlawumbi ukule age ndiyifunayona.**
if he is within the age group I want then that’s fine

Male contacts who were considered too old or too young were also ‘deleted’.

The female teens said that they look out for signs of potential danger, such as requests for face to face meetings from strangers:

‘Othi ufn’ukudibanaufy n’ukudibana nawe kodwa akakwazi nokwazi’ (*A person who wants to meet up with you but they don’t even know you*)

The girls, in particular, emphasized their worldly-wise ability to ‘read’ for signs of potential problems from unknown contacts. In particular, they mentioned implausible and exaggerated claims of devotion from male admirers:

**Nax’athi uyakuthanda kodwa akakwazi.**
When they say they love you but they don’t even know you
Other telltale signs which might indicate potential danger, or unwanted lecherous pestering included contacts who attempted to control their choice of clothing for (imagined) future meetings, or contacts who attempted to initiate steamier genres such as cybersex via mobile phone by asking pointed questions about what they were doing or wearing:

*Akuxelele xa sidibana nxiba kanje.*

[Guys who say] When we meet you must dress like this

*kuyabanda wenza ntoni?’ usezingubeni zakho?’ ‘umam’akho akazukubetha xa ndizile?’ ukhubone.

It’s cold what are you doing? are you in bed,,? is your mother going to be angry with you if I come over? Those kinds of things.

### Social interfaces - grouping the ‘ba-rongo’

These overly forward contacts (the wrong type or ‘ba-rongo’) are seen as problematic if they intrude on one’s real life. Nonetheless the female teens who participated in the focus group explained that they would not delete them from their list of contacts. Instead, they customised their MXit chat interfaces so that they could identify the ‘ba-rongo’, while keeping them on hand to provide entertainment or to dispel loneliness ‘baskeepa in company’ (‘they keep us in company’).

*Then ke ngoku ubagroupishe bodwa aba ingathi ba-rongo.*

Then you group all those that seem to be the wrong type separately

It is possible that the teenaged girls in the focus group may have exaggerated their dedication to the conventional woman’s role as sexual gatekeepers. The males did not mention them playing this role, although this may relate equally to the need for conventional masculine prestige associated with sexual prowess. Furthermore, none of the contact maps discussed in Chapter 4 had categories which matched the above description (‘barongo’). While many contact maps included amarhuzu (the dudes, or tough guys) on their maps, this is not necessarily a derogatory or cautionary term. The closest match consists of a diagram that differentiates between friends, (eligible) males (‘guys’) and ixhegs (old men). A couple of other contact mappings indicated potential stranger danger from ‘unknown viruses’ or annoyance from ‘unneeded’ contacts.

### If they chat well...

 Teens are continually exercising surveillance and passing judgement on their MXit contacts based on their history of conversational interactions. Some participants noted the difficulty of judging whether a contact would interact in the way they preferred -- *‘sincokola kakahle’ ‘if they chat well’*. ‘Chatting well’ for the female focus group was not merely the correct use of language, but required the existence of a strong interpersonal connection. Here teens were acutely aware of the
implications of small interactional details, such as who greets whom, whether the other person is sensitive to their mood, and whether there is coherence in the overall arc of the interaction – they notice whether their partner’s comments ‘fit in’ with what they have said earlier. Such interactions are considered indicators of a true friend on MXit.

While the teens draw on their everyday knowledge of the people in their existing social networks, they pointed out that this knowledge is not always reliable, as MXit often brought out unknown dimensions of their friends’ characters:

> Uphuma naye uyotheng’isonka but xa umbona ku-MXit yho into azithethayo zi-gigantic. You go out with them to go and buy bread but when you chat to him on MXit, the things that he chats about are gigantic.

In some cases, this would result in a formerly trusted friend being recategorised into one of the undesirable and less trusted groups.

> Okanye akugezele ku-MXit, uqond’uba hayibo nguye iowa. Like for instance he pesters you on MXit and you wonder what’s now happened to him.

Ironically, given the widespread panic about the deleterious effects of textisms on teen literacies, both male and female teens referred to the importance of correct spelling in MXit chats, as incorrect spelling could hamper understanding and slow down communication.

‘Chatting well’ also depends to some extent on familiarity with MXit’s highly abbreviated conversational conventions – and this is an area where MXit ‘newcomers’ are likely to fail. As one male teen explained, using unabbreviated words and long sentences are the marks of a newcomer to MXit, of someone who had not yet learned the correctly abbreviated style (‘uyi-shortnishe’).

> Ukh’ubone xa umixa, xa uqala ukumixa njengokuba ungazange wamixa uqala ukumixa njengokuba i-sentence kufuneka uyi-shortnishe. Sometimes when you are starting to mixa, you don’t know anything about it, now you know that you have to shorten the sentences.

Newcomers are frowned upon, since their limited command of these conventions annoys seasoned MXit users by slowing down the flow of conversation and interrupting it with continual requests for explanation:
Male teens were very aware that being a MXit ‘newcomer’ relegated them to a lower status in the peer hierarchy:

Zezinye iwey ezibethayo ezo.
Those are some of the things that give you away.

One of the participants who had been ‘deleted’ by his friends when he started using MXit, remembered it as the worst thing that could happen on MXit, and a ‘very painful’ experience. The male teens also disagreed about the etiquette of instructing other users in the correct use of textisms – they debated whether it would be too embarrassing to explain the correct way of writing on MXit to a newcomer.

Teens need to understand the meaning of MXit’s characteristic set of highly abbreviated initialisms (e.g. LTM- listening to music). They must also be able to juggle several different simultaneous threads of conversation, and be able to remember which message goes to which contact. One of the male teens remembered how he had been chatting to two girls at the same time, and had embarrassed himself by sending a message he had intended for one to the other.

To ‘chat well’, teens also need to be tuned in to the subtler implications of specific conversational moves on MXit, such as (an example used by a participant) using an emoticon as a reply when not in the mood for extended conversation ‘mhalwumbe awufunkuthetha’ (“sometimes you don’t want to chat”). An newcomer to MXit might demand an explanation, whereas someone with more experience would be more likely to respect the motivation for the minimal response.

The female participants were also aware of the potential for duplicity and dishonesty on MXit.

Kaloku kuyabhalwa phaya uba ngubani bani but sometimes abantu babhala into engekhoyo phaya like umntw’abhale igama elingelolakhe
A person writes who he is on the profile, but sometimes people write the wrong information, like giving a false name

Again, the punishment for dishonesty is social ‘deletion’ ‘if uzakundixokisela ndizakudilitha’ (“if you you lie to me I will delete you’).
‘Chatting well’ also depends on a shared interest in certain topics, and participants expressed their appreciation of contacts who never seemed to run out of entertaining things to say. Here the storytelling ability of contacts, and their ability to dramatise the mundane and everyday is key. Participants mentioned being engaged by talk of fights and gangsters chasing one another around, or of miraculous faith healings with people being cured of AIDS or cancer at church.

AIRTIME AND CHOCOLATES - PLAYING WITH SEXUAL POWER

The male teens were unanimous that the best thing which could happen to them on MXit was to ‘get a girl’ (Kufuman’itsheri), and a great deal of interaction on MXit involved flirtation, romantic and sexual chat.

Teen girls had stringent criteria when describing what made a good flirt on MXit. In contrast, the male teens had a somewhat more goal-directed sense of flirtation. For them, flirting involved the use of affectionate terms such as ‘honey’ ‘teddy bear’ or ‘darling’, affectionate forms of their names and slang phrases such as ‘oo-ukum, andikho kuwe’ (you are in me [I love you], I am not in you [I don’t love you]).

The male teens discussed various strategies for combining face to face courtship with flirtation on MXit. One teen explained that MXit allowed him to gain insight into his interactions with the opposite sex:

La nto iyakunceda ukuba ukhe uzijonge uba unjani ematsherini, incoko yakho injani.
That thing helps you to look at yourself how you are with girls, how you handle yourself.

Another male teen talked about how MXit was a space for rehearsing the conventionally masculine role of initiating romantic and sexual interactions, and that this was easier for him on MXit than it was face to face.

Kuba xa ufika pha phambi kwakhe awuthethi la nto ubuyithetha ku-MXit.
Because it happens that when you get in front of her, then you are no longer saying what you were saying on MXit.

The male teens also described a ‘romantic’ genre of talk, where a predictable sequence of progressively more direct invitations and encouraging responses leads to more explicit physical and sexual descriptions akin to ‘sexting’ or cybersex. In the following description, girls are given the responsibility for initiating the ‘game’ the game [isuke yahlala –the kickoff in a soccer match]:

67
Female teens were more forthcoming about the nuances of the journey of flirtation and the play of power between teenaged girls and their suitors, although they begged to be excused from giving details about the nature of sexual chat that they may have experienced or initiated.

The girls recognized the feelgood factor in having male contacts greet them flirtatiously when they logged into MXit (‘hi babes’, ‘hi love’ or ‘hi sweetie’). Nonetheless, they denied that they were influenced by such strategies:

But kuwe ibe ingekho sexy tu kodwa ubone kubo uba bacingba fanuba.  
But to you that is not sexy at all, you can see they [guys] think they are being sexy

Some female teens demanded more serious tests of commitment, such as whether the contact would be prepared to buy airtime for them:

Urigh, andithengele i-air time.  
They are the right kind, they buy me airtime

The girls appeared to relish the power they held when flirting on MXit. As discussed above they often claimed the role of gatekeepers of romantic and sexual interaction. In some cases they played this role in a decidedly transactional way, with some individuals apparently viewing gifts of airtime and chocolates as suitable exchanges for their attention on MXit:

Hayi yonk‘intw‘endiyifunayo kuye ndizakuyifumana qha, air time ndizakuyifumana, ntoni ntoni ndiyayifuman, ntoni ntoni, hayi andinayo, hayi ke ungaphinde u-chathe nam  
No everything I want I get, if it’s airtime, anything I am going to get, if such and such I don’t have [and he can’t give it], okay then you must not chat with me again.

More sceptical female teens were aware of the quid pro quo component to such exchanges, and were particularly sensitive to the leverage provided by a would-be suitor’s purchase of airtime.

i-air time uzawuman’esithi hayibo Joe la air time bendikuthengele yona khang’uphone noku-phona iphele njani xa uphinda ucela eny‘i-air time.
If its airtime he will say what happened to that airtime I bought you you didn’t even phone me and now you are telling me it’s finished.

One of the teens talked about how she had stopped chatting on MXit with an acquaintance (and would-be suitor) when he failed to bring her a gift of chocolate as she had requested. When he did arrive with the chocolate, he greeted her differently, ‘Baby ndiyithengile ichocolate yakho’ ‘Baby I bought your chocolate’. In his understanding their relationship had shifted onto a more intimate footing.

Recognising the intricacies of these complex dances of intimacy, the more sceptical teens rejected gifts of airtime, maintaining their power and rejecting being put into the role of the one expected to make the call:

Xa ufuna ukundiphonela, xa ufuna icall yam zithengele eyakho mna andifuni kuphonela mntu.
If you want to phone me, buy your own airtime, If you want my call, buy your own airtime, I don’t want to phone anyone.

In a more established relationship, the teens talked about flirtation on MXit as something they would ‘settle for’ in the absence of closer physical contact, or as a consolation for not being able to spend time together with a partner:

Like athethe uba ndiphi omhlawumbi uyandikhumbula ntoni, ntoni, ntoni noba but kodwa shame uyayazi uba andikho kulo nto mna ukh’ubone noba mhlawumbi uyaqonda ukhumbul’umntu uvel’ubon’uba mawukuzixolisamawuzixolise shame pha kwa-Mix
Like he asks where am I and tells me that he’s missing me and so on, but shame he knows that i am not interested in that. But sometimes you know you are missing someone, and you decide to make yourself happy shame on MXit

Kulahl’umlenze (to throw a leg or party)
The most enjoyable or fulfilling interactions on MXit were associated with the discovery of a new connection which allowed a deep and mutual friendship to develop from a chance interaction. One of the male teens described the delight he had experienced when discovering a shared understanding and successful communication with a girl:

uthol’ukuthi xa nithetha nithetha on a same level nobayi-two, iinto enizithethayo niya-understandenda.
when you find that you are on the same level, when you have a common understanding

While teens valued their closest friends, at the girls’ focus group, a female participant pointed out that her best friends were not necessarily the most interesting to her:

Umnt’okujwayelayo uyandibhora.
A person who gets too familiar is boring

Thus teens sometimes turn away from the tedium of the ‘full-time intimate’ cocoon, towards the thrill of the unknown – networking, discovering, and building intimacy and trust in their relationships with their new neetshomi ku-MXit (MXit friends)

Likexa nidibana udibane like neetshomi ku-MXit like umntu ongamaziyo and then nitshathe ngo-MXit athi ucela ukudibana nawe, and then xa senidiben ubone like uba ngumnt’oright lo yitshomi then nibezithomi aman’evizithela kowenu, nawe uma na uvizithela kowabo.
like a person that you dont know and then you chat on MXit and then they say they would like to meet up with you, and then when you meet, you see that this is a good person and then you become friends, and they come and visit you at your home, and you visit them at their home

Nonetheless, some male teens measured a good MXit friendship somewhat more instrumentally -- according to whether girls gave photographs when asked to do so, and whether online encounters led to face to face meetings.

This expanded set of communicative opportunities is also a social minefield, and the female participants in the focus group cited several hurtful experiences that they associated with MXit – both cowardly attacks, where MXit was used to avoid a face to face confrontation, and the viral spread of hurtful gossip, or ‘cyber-bullying’:

Abantw’aba—mhlawumbi umntu ufuna ukuxelela into then angakuxeleli ebussweni mhlawumbi ufuna ukuxelela over MXit mhlawumbi yinto efunisa akuxelele kwiface leyo, okanye kuthethwe ngawe ku-MXit.
People like, maybe a person wants to tell you something and they don’t tell you to your face they tell you over MXit instead, and then people talk about you on MXit

Managing use – ‘kukho iphone kukho incwadi’ (there’s a phone, there’s a book’)

While they present themselves as adept social navigators, the teens did admit their difficulties with managing MXit as an all-consuming, always available link to a world of perpetual social interaction.

Many of the teens reported that they set rules for themselves regarding time limits for MXit use, although it was not entirely clear whether they were able to adhere to them. Parental involvement appeared to focus on banning or taking away phones during exam time.

Like xa kufike isikhathi sokuba ndizakubhala i-exams, iphone andiyifumani.
When it is time for exams I don’t get the phone.

Teens are likely to contrast the sociable and addictive interactions with peers on MXit with solitary concentration on a book, which they associate with studies:

Mna ndakhe ndifunda u-8, u-8 -9 kukho iphone kukho incwadi immediately xa kungena imessage ndiyayeka ndiyabhala uba ndiqibokuyibeka kuphinda kungen’imessage ndiphinde ndiyeye ingxaki kuse ndiske ndivele ndivale incwadi ezi ndingastaalishi kwa-ukustadisha ndiphumle noba kupha ngoo-3 -4 oko bendiku-MXit bendiba ndizakucross nighter ke ngelo xesa then pha ngoo-6 ndiphume ndihambe ndiyobhala.
I study from 8-9, there’s a phone, there’s a book. Immediately when I get a message I leave the book, and attend to the phone and chat, and as soon as I put down the phone I get another message, so the problem is I just close the book and don’t study. And then I rest maybe around 3-4am on MXit all this time, thinking I am going to study all night [cross night] and then around 6am I rest and then go and write [the exam].

Hayi umzali uyakwazi ukucela akuxelel’uba ndicela uzungayenzi into ethile, but bakhona bangamameliyo avel’azixelel’uba hayi maan akazukundibona noba ndiyayenza noba andiyenzi, so hayi mandiyenze ngoku angekhoyo, like athi sukutshatha phakathi evekini and then like xa yena elele, ebusuku uqand’uba hayi suka mandithathe iphone ndimixe.
Yes your parents ask you please do this, but there are those that don’t listen, they think she is not going to see, like a parent tells you not to chat eduring the week, and then when the parents are asleep you say no man I must take up my phone and mxit

While ways of managing time and managing multi-tasking and attention might be useful topics for lessons at school, schools are more likely to ban cellphones altogether to preserve teachers’ ability to command teens’ attention. Breaking rules and defying authority by using MXit during class is also cited as the cause of dramatic conflicts with teachers:
I was mixing and mixing and then I thought the teacher didn’t see me and she was standing there and then she said [my name] and then I said ‘Miss’. ‘Give me that phone’ [she said], and then I was like ‘hay hay hay’, and then thrust her up and the we were fighting with my blazer when she switched back on, it started to vibrate, and it went jeee!

**Social Convergence – Hayibo, Ms Cupido!**

Teens’ accounts of MXit include discussions of unwanted forms of ‘social convergence’. Social convergence takes place when ‘disparate social contexts are collapsed into one’, and social network users find that the different social worlds in which they participate converge online (boyd, 2008). MXit’s ability to conceal the identity of a contact is particularly productive as an engine for social horror and dramatic irony. One teen regaled the focus group with a story of teachers chatting on MXit during school time, while their students (also chatting on MXit in class) receive an invitation from a new MXit contact, who appears to be a teen. They subsequently discover (to their horror), that the new contact is their teacher, Miss Cupido.

The Miss Cupido story has the flavour of an urban legend, but it does indicate how MXit’s widening of social networks means that teens now see a different dimension of some adults, perhaps a side that they would prefer not to see:

Like eklasini ungomny’umntu but xa eku-MXit uqond’ubingathi uthetha netshomi yakho, ingathi yintanga yakho kodwa ngu-Mis wakho lo.

Like in the classroom she is someone else, but on MXit you would think that you are chatting to your friend/peer, but it’s your teacher.

Stories such as these have further implications, in that they suggest that, for teens, MXit is not a neutral channel of communication which can be used by anyone in any social context, but that it is marked very strongly by its associations with adolescent romantic and sexual subcultures. In one case, a female teen said that older men made her feel uncomfortable by chatting on MXit and then staring at her on public transport.

Okanye icaphukisa ngala nto yoba heyi ubone ixhego elidala aa 58 year old liyatshatha uyajongwa etreyinini.

Or something else that’s irritating, you see an old man of 58 years is chatting, they look at you on the train.

These associations may shift if MXit use gradually becomes integrated into broader society. Nonetheless, MXit’s current cultural resonances, and its lack of cross-generational social networks...
would need to be addressed and acknowledged if MXit is used in school contexts. Social interaction with teachers via MXit may present several more obstacles than using the platform for distribution of Kontax.

MXit does not allow user-generated content or forms of online publication such as blogging. Nonetheless, teens have control of their MXit interfaces, and they use these ‘writing-rights’ (Kress, 1994:21) to configure this channel and create a customized, evolving social network for themselves. In this respect, MXit users engage in similar strategies to those employed by teens from the US who use IM on PCs to design their social worlds (Lewis and Fabos, 2005:486), both by the way they configure and monitor their contact list, and also by ‘writing their way in’ or using their written performances to join the textual worlds of groups to which they want to belong (Lewis and Fabos, 2005:495).

These written performances are part of teens’ developing a repertoire of appropriate behaviours as adult men and women. Normative assumptions about gender and sexuality and the performance of conventionally masculine and feminine roles are pervasive in MXit although it also functions as a space of rebellion and transgression. Certain literacy events associated with MXit use, in particular the prevalence of highly instrumental or transactional genres of romantic and sexual interaction are worthy of closer scrutiny in relation to current public health initiatives to reduce the prevalence of multiple concurrent sexual partnerships and transactional sex.

Despite these similarities, certain aspects of the way in which m4Lit participants used IM is distinctive. Certain characteristics of mobile phones, such as the small size of the display, and limited potential for multitasking across application windows mean that mobile literacy involves less ‘spatial scanning’ than other varieties of digital reading and writing might (Lewis and Fabos, 2005:486). Participants did report conducting multiple conversations at once, and the qualities they associated with ‘chatting well’ suggest that despite the lack of expansive displays or spatial scanning, mobile ‘rules of speaking’ also demand the ability to choose how to focus attention while still tracking multiple streams of simultaneous conversations.

Discussions in the focus groups did not suggest that older teens might abandon MXit language and adopt standard orthographies in an attempt to appear more ‘mature’, in the way that the predominantly middle-class participants did in the Lewis and Fabos (2005) study. Documenting actual styles and practices of IM would require an observational and ethnographic approach which was not part of the m4Lit study.
7. MOBISITE DESIGN & DISCOURSE

How did the mobile literacy practices documented in Chapter 5 and 6 influence the ways in which teens reacted to the m4Lit project, and their usage of the project’s mobile website, or mobisite (www.kontax.mobi)?

Teen responses to the Kontax story in isiXhosa are analysed in more detail in Deumert (2010). As discussed in Chapter 4, the release of Kontax on MXit generated a far larger audience for the m-novel, than was possible with the mobisite alone, but did not allow Kontax’s readers to interact or connect with one another at all, or to publish the stories that they entered for the competition.

Thus, while MXit is currently the best way of marketing to or communicating with this age-group, the architecture of the application does not encourage Web2.0-style user generated content. In contrast, on kontax.mobi, teens who engaged with the story contributed comments and wall posts on the site and on its social network, in both English and isiXhosa. During the period of the initial release of the story on the mobisite (2009-09-30 to 2009-10-21) 3234 users attempted to register, but many did not manage to do so. Only 207 users registered successfully, while 67 users participated actively by contributing 457 comments and other posts to the site, with 10 active users posting almost half of these contributions. The social interaction revealed by these contributions and their lexical profiles is the focus of this chapter.

Figure 26: Mirrored bilingual navigation design of kontax.mobi
The overall architecture of the mobisite is a bilingual mirrored design, with two identical versions of the site interface and Kontax story available in English and isiXhosa. Visitors chose which version of the site they want to use on their first visit, and they are redirected to their chosen version on subsequent visits (Figure 28).

This chapter documents how this design, and in particular the bilingual architecture of the site may have been experienced by teens in relation to their other everyday literacy practices, as expressed in the comments and wallposts that they contributed to the site.

As can be seen from Figure 28, the site’s interface centres around the bilingual design and the chapters of the Kontax story, although the architecture includes a full social network. Thus the interface which visitors see as they arrive conceals social network features from visitors who have not yet registered or logged in. Each chapter includes features such as comments and polls which were used to spark debate around the issues raised in each chapter. Users who chose to register gained access to these interactive features and to a social network which is a scaled-down version similar to those found on social network sites such as Facebook.

Although currently Kontax is set up with an interface in two languages, the CMS for the site is set up to generate an interface for as many additional languages as might be required. Participation in the two parts of the site was not symmetrical, with most visitors using the English version (the reasons for this are discussed by Deumert [2010]).

**WEB CONVENTIONS VS. MXIT**

Proportionally then, only a very small number of the mobisite’s total number of visitors registered, commented and participated on the mobisite, while many teens told the interviewers that they preferred to use MXit to access the story. As regular MXit users, they were accustomed to signing up for content from what they called the MXit ‘channels’ (adding a MXit contact for a television program which provided mobile content downloads. As one of the participants correctly advised us during the usability observations, ‘If you [publish the story] outside MXit many people will struggle with it.’

Only users who mastered the tricky registration process on kontax.mobi were able to comment or to use the social network features on the site – the design of the registration process left a great deal to be desired and caused many usability problems – filling in web forms, agreeing to terms of service, and needing to click on a URL to send in a confirmation SMS in order to return to the site. In the usability sessions, frustrated teens told us that they often complete tricky online registration processes
(such as registering for Facebook or Gmail) on computers at school or at the public library rather than on their mobile phones.

In addition to usability issues associated with the design of the registration form, the usability observations revealed that specificities of the language associated with web interfaces was also causing difficulties. Two of the four teens were stymied because they repeatedly tried to ‘log in’ before they had registered (they were instructed to do so by the site), and did not understand the structure of the registration genre as a rule-governed literacy event – they did not realise that registration was a prerequisite for logging in. In some cases, participants tried repeatedly and then abandoned the process entirely. Although one participant tried to switch to the isiXhosa interface, the translated version of the interface did not help him to solve this particular problem.

Teens preferred to read Kontax on MXit rather than on the mobisite not only because it was more accessible and its interface conventions were familiar to them, but also because it was somewhat cheaper to read it that way. In general, users were very aware of the cost of using their phones to download data. One teen commented that Kontax was cheaper to use than many websites: he was accustomed to spending up to R3.50 on other sites. Even MXit, which is heavily optimised for mobile use came in for some criticism. Since the application had started allowing users to display their own profile pictures, one of the female teens said that it had become an ‘airtime thief’.

**PARTICIPATION AND COMMUNITY**

For those who did manage to register on kontax.mobi, participation by commenting was incentivised with rewards of airtime, and these rewards subsequently drove the primary forms of participation on the site. In order to leave comments or to vote in polls, users needed to register with the site and to create a social network-like profile page which included basic information, status updates and a wall on which other users could write. Teens were also encouraged to contribute their own writing on an ‘Express Yourself’ wall.

The social network features allowed users to provide their details on profile pages, post status updates, upload profile images and write ‘wall posts’ on other users’ profiles.
The availability of these features allowed for the development of a small but dedicated affinity space (Gee, 2003) for interested readers who not only read the story but contributed comments and other postings to the site, primarily to discuss the events of the plot as the Kontax story unfolded.

The visualisation in Figure 29 represents commenting activity on the Kontax mobisite shows how participation centred around the story chapters and the competition, with the Kontax story providing a central hub of commenting activity (much as the teacher is the focus of attention and directs participation in many classrooms). Not much social activity arose from the comments themselves. In most cases, comments on the story received no replies from other readers.
The Kontax Team node forms a much smaller secondary hub in the network. This was the user name used by the m4Lit staff and reflects their role in maintaining and facilitating the discussion of the story - a connection apparent from the strong edge connecting the Kontax_team and Story nodes.

Figure 28: Social network structure of wall posts to user and character profiles on kontax.mobi

A different pattern emerged as visitors engaged with one another via the site’s social network. Figure 30 is a visualisation of a very different, more social form of commenting activity where users were able to write ‘wall posts’ and publish them on one another’s profile pages. While the Kontax story still played a central role (since users wrote wall posts for the profile pages of the story characters), the characters do not dominate attention. This area of the site reveals a less centralised distribution of participation, with a small group of active users establishing connections with one another as well as with the Kontax story and site facilitators. The social interactions here and in the messages sent from one user to another took place without any need for an incentive or airtime reward, and suggest that the social network features and user contributions could have been foregrounded more strongly in the site interface, and in particular, on the almost blank home page, which presents only the logo and the instruction to choose the isiXhosa or English interface (see Figure 28).
The focus group discussions and mobisite usability evaluations both suggested that some users did not participate in commenting on the site because, as they understood it, the purpose of commenting was to criticise, (rather than to participate in a conversation). (This may be influenced by the particular meanings associated with schoolteacher ‘comments’ on teens’ written work at school.) For example, when asked whether the commenting feature was a good idea, focus group participants answered as follows:

*It's a good idea so that the person who wrote the story can see what is lacking. [The readers can critique the story and the author can know about it.]*

During the usability evaluation, one participant remarked that he wanted to read the isiXhosa and English versions together, since he was not good at reading in isiXhosa, and ‘it helps people to understand if you look at both’

**Lexical profiles of mobile literacies**

What mobile literacies were required and elicited by the Kontax m-novel? By analysing the use of words in the m-novel and on the mobisite, it is possible to ascertain the kind of vocabulary needed to read Kontax and to compare the novel with the kinds of writing that are used in mobile instant messaging by South African youth.

Lexical profiles were created for three distinct collections of mobile writing, and all three were analysed using an automated lexical analysis software package, AntWordProfiler (Anthony, L, 2006, 2004-2009).

- **Kontax m-novel.** The first collection was the full text of the English version of the Kontax m-novel, written by Sam Wilson.
- **Mobisite reader comments.** The second collection included all the comments and wall posts posted by teens in the target age group (14-17) in response to the English version of the novel on the kontax.mobi website.
- **Mig33 chatlog.** The third collection of text was selected purely for comparison since it provides a good example of mobile chat by young multilingual South Africans. This collection of words was derived from a log of a mobile chatroom (on Mig33) where South Africans used their mobile phones on April 24 to discuss the National Election results.

Four different word lists were used to identify the presence of various forms of discourse in the collections.

- **High frequency list 1 and 2** The first two lists, from the General Service List of English Words are standard word lists often used to compile vocabulary lists for English language curricula, since they are the most frequently used 1000 words, and the next most frequently 1000 words, respectively, in standard written English (Nation, 2006).
- **Academic Word List.** The third list (the Academic Word List, (Coxhead, 1998, 2000) includes words which are frequently used in secondary and tertiary texts and which feature most prominently when schooling and university education is conducted in English.

- **Textisms List.** The fourth list (currently under construction) is the Textisms list, and was generated from logs of mobile chatrooms, lexically profiled. It is a collection of abbreviated words gleaned from user posts to the Kontax website and from a selection of other mobile chats by South African youth (and thus reflects local pronunciation and vocabulary).

The textisms list includes shortenings (e.g. pic), contractions (e.g. thnx), g-clippings (e.g. readin) and other clippings (e.g. phon), acronyms (e.g. ANC), initialisms (e.g. LOL), and some non-conventional spellings (e.g. skul, rite) and accent stylization (e.g. wateva), which are only included if they include a form of abbreviation. (see Thurlow, C., 2003 and Plester et al., 2009). Textisms which do not include contraction or abbreviation (such as words with omitted apostrophes (cant), symbols (@), letter/number homophones (4sha), and non-conventional spellings which do not shorten the word) were not included in the list.

These categories of textism were not included in the textisms list, because certain posts and comments may have been submitted from computers. The Kontax mobisite was accessed by many computer users, who also often use non-conventional spelling. Other categories of textism cannot be processed by current lexical analysis software. Lexical analysis software strips numbers and punctuation, and so the Textisms list also does not include number-word combinations or creative use of punctuation and symbols in emoticons.

Current studies suggest that while non-standard orthographies are used by both phone and PC-based IM users, the contractions characteristic of mobile phone texting are not present in IM data from PC users in the US (Ling and Baron, 2007) Thus the available research suggests that contractions are likely to originate from mobile phone users, although this research does not necessarily apply to mobile-centric web users using computers.

The presence of most additional non-standard orthographies are reflected in the ‘Other’ category. Number-word combinations, and emoticons, are not counted. For this reason the level of textism use on kontax.mobi is definitely higher than that indicated in this analysis.

The following is an example of the entries on the Textisms list:

\[\begin{align*}
&\text{ABT} \\
&\text{ABWT} \\
&\text{BOUT} \\
&\text{ACUSATION} \\
&\text{ACC} \\
&\text{ACROS} \\
&\text{ACTUALY} \\
&\text{ADAZ} \\
&\text{AD}
\end{align*}\]

\[^4\] Aggregate platform data was available from Admob, which indicated that approximately 27% of page requests came from browsers on computer operating systems. It was not possible to ascertain which comments were posted from mobile phones and which originated from computer users.
**LEXICAL PROFILES OF M-NOVEL AND KONTAX.MOBI USER COMMENTS**

The results of the lexical profiling are summarised in Figure 31, and indicate a few of the key differences between the versions of literacy required by the Kontax mobi-novel, user posts to kontax.mobi and the instant messaging and chat commonly associated with Mig33 and MXit.

**Lexical profiles (English): Kontax m-novel, reader contributions and mig33 chatroom**

![Lexical Profiles Graph]

Figure 29: Lexical profiles (English) of Kontax m-novel, reader contributions (comments, postings and wallposts) to kontax.mobi and mig33 chatroom.
Standard English vocabulary

The mobile novel is probably written at a reasonable level of difficulty for a teen audience who are intermediate to advanced learners of English - almost 88% of Kontax’s word tokens match commonly used English words in standard written English. This percentage of commonly used words may be even higher, given that certain very common words are likely to be familiar to South African readers (e.g. naartjie, cellphone), but these words do not feature on the General Service List. Nonetheless, the novel is not necessarily an easy read for beginner language learners whose English vocabulary may not be very large. Written texts begin to come into focus at 90% known vocabulary, and are only fully in focus at 98% known vocabulary (Nation, 2006).

The mobile novel is designed to be distributed via mobile phone, but the vocabulary it uses is not adapted to mobile literacy practices, other than a few examples of textspeak in MXit dialogues between characters.

Fewer than 1% of the words used in Kontax require a familiarity with school or university language. This is common for fictional texts. Leisure reading of this kind is thus distinct from the kinds of reading associated with academic success at school (other than in the study of fiction for English literature).

At home with textisms

The lexical profile of the reader comments on kontax.mobi indicates that at least 25% of the words posted to the mobisite by users can be characterised as ‘textisms’ – a proportion very similar to that found in the log from Mig33 (26.2%). This presence of textisms accounts for the lower number of matches between the mobisite posts and words from the English General Service List. The high percentage of textspeak tokens can be read as an indicator that the visitors to the kontax.mobi site who contributed comments and posts felt at home there. They did not need to shift their customary orthography, as they would if using a pen to write a test or exam, or as they might if sending an SMS message to a teacher.

Teens appear to be responding to the analytical story prompts by using slightly more academic vocabulary (1.46%) in their posts than is used in the novel itself (0.89%), although this difference is not significant at the 0.05 level.

Less code-switching by Kontax readers

When compared to the text from the mobisite, the Mig33 chatroom log has a similar proportion of textspeak (26.2%) but includes far fewer tokens (43.32%) that match the high frequency list (1). The remaining tokens (‘Other’ in Figure 31) are coded according to language (see Table 13). The Mig33 chatroom discourse includes many words focused on the topic of the discussion (elections), but it
also differs markedly from the mobisite discourse in the extent to which codeswitching takes place. While 5.51% of tokens in the mig33 chatroom are codeswitched from other South African languages, only 0.46% of the tokens in the comments and posts on the mobisite are codeswitched. This difference is statistically significant (P=0.03).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>English tokens</th>
<th>Codeswitched tokens</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mobisite comments and</td>
<td>90.12</td>
<td>0.46</td>
<td>9.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>posts</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mig33 chatroom</td>
<td>74.97</td>
<td>5.51</td>
<td>19.53</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 13: Presence of English and Codeswitched tokens in Kontax.mobi and in multilingual mig33 chatroom.

Thus the reader comments on the Kontax mobisite appear to rely more on English and employ significantly less code-switching than teens might commonly experience in mobile chat.

It is helpful to think of site designs as environments, and that websites, like other environments, can impose particular ‘regimes of language’ (Blommaert et al., 2005:214) on those who use them. The lexical analysis presented above suggests how the visitors to the Kontax mobisite may have restricted their use of code-switching. While kontax.mobi was highly successful in giving teens ‘writing-rights’, their limited use of code-switching when writing in English again raises the question of ‘ownership’ and ‘clienthood’ within the participatory space created by kontax.mobi (Blommaert et al., 2005).

It is not clear whether this possible shift away from code-switching was a response to the bilingual architecture of the kontax mobisite (which separates English and isiXhosa versions, and which does not display English and isiXhosa reader comments together) or whether teens were making concessions towards the monolingual English audience which this site design implies. Thus, ironically, the bilingual design may have encouraged a more monolingual approach to written communication than might be found if teens were engaging with their peers. Participants in the usability observations asked specifically for interfaces which would make it easier for them to utilise their whole linguistic repertoire, by reading in both English and isiXhosa, other South African languages, only 0.46% of the tokens in the comments and posts on the mobisite are codeswitched. This difference is statistically significant (P=0.03).
8. Conclusion

competence becomes most apparent when we allow many starting points for learning and many paths to progress. (Hull and Schultz, 2001:595)

The term ‘mobile literacies’ is deliberately used in this study as a way of legitimising the skills and competencies that teens develop around mobile phone use, and which their teachers and parents tend to ignore. While the m4Lit project showed that more highly valued literacy practices such as reading novels can migrate to mobile phones, other aspects of the research have documented and validated vernacular literacies such as the textisms associated with ‘MXit language’ and knowledge of characteristic genres of interaction on MXit. These are not simply second-rate versions of schooled literacies, but are connected to the ‘intergenerational struggle of literacy norms’ associated with youth-defined literacy practices around the world (Ito, et al., 2010, 26).

They are also connected to the vital strategies that low income communities use to leverage their social networks (both intensive and extensive) as a way of ensuring their survival, which have been adapted since the arrival of mobile phones. An ethnographic methodology which homes in on observing and understanding teens’ actual online practices would allow a deeper understanding of the meanings these abilities and activities have for South African teens.

Buckingham talks about access, understanding, and creativity as three important dimensions of digital literacy (2007:149). South African teens’ access to the internet has expanded significantly along with certain uses of the mobile web. This study has found high levels of access to the mobile Internet, which are associated with distinctive patterns or genres of online communication, both through the use of writing and distinctive written genres and in the use of multimodal systems of communication, such as software interfaces, and profile pictures. Understanding and creativity currently focus primarily on contributions to transient IM-style discourse and chats. Owing to MXit’s dominance of the mobile space, South African teens’ understanding of web conventions may be lagging behind, as is their sense of themselves as web authors. Creativity and participation in Web 2.0 is subject to major limitations, as MXit does not allow user-generated content or the development of online affinity spaces. This suggests an opportunity for other social networks, and the gap is perhaps already being filled by Facebook to some extent.

This study has attempted to move beyond a ‘deficit’ model, which interprets mobile uses of literacy as deficient and perhaps even harmful in relation to elite networking practices and more highly
valued practices of reading and writing in schools. It has been essential to engage with the intimate and expressive meanings of such communication, since as Buckingham points out, approaches which acknowledge young people’s pleasure, play, and social interaction, and interest in design and media production should be central to an investigation of leisure digital literacies, and indeed to uses of digital media in the curriculum:

In most children’s leisure-time experiences, computers are much more than devices for information retrieval: they convey images and fantasies, provide opportunities for imaginative self-expression and play, and serve as a medium through which intimate personal relationships are conducted (Buckingham, 2007:151).

Closer study of these mobile literacy events and practices and their social significance will allow South African teachers and curriculum developers to attend to the ‘social, cultural, and linguistic resources’ (Hull and Schultz, 2001:593) which mobile phone use has already helped students to develop. Bringing these practices into the classroom for academic scrutiny could also give students the meta-language to articulate and develop their existing tacit knowledge of mobile communicative strategies and practices.

Curricula which acknowledge and embrace the literacies of mobile communication would be an important contribution. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the complex and creative uses of literacy documented in this study are rooted in teens’ motivations to act and excel in a particular social world. For this reason, it is worth heeding the caution from Lewis and Fabos (2005), who encourage educators not to assume that teens’ enthusiasm about IM would remain unchanged if their school-teacher attempted to use it as the topic of a classroom assignment. They warn that social meanings are central to the participants’ understanding of literacy practices in IM. Teens identify with roles and group norms associated with their version of teen culture, and they express these through the distinctive inter-personal genres of instant messaging discussed above. As Lewis and Fabos (2005) explain, these are also the factors which drive participation and motivate teens in their assiduous use of instant messaging. These out-of-school literacies are useful and absorbing because they are necessary for the social interactions that teens value - and only then does it become the focus of their strategic and analytical attention (Lewis and Fabos, 2005:496).

Finally, while it is currently fashionable to denigrate the opportunities provided by schooling, particularly its role in developing certain kinds of expertise with essayistic and expository writing, these forms of discourse have migrated online from print, and continue to provide and legitimate social power in a way that everyday literacies probably do not (Hull and Schultz, 2001:595). Understanding how to gain access to, participate in, or challenge the discourses of power,
whatever their medium, remains a democratic priority for opening access to the privileges associated with education and schooled literacy practices.

**Recommendations**

**Interfaces for multilingualism**

Kontax.mobi is a valuable contribution to multilingual publishing, and future projects could explore alternative interfaces to allow multilingual expression, communication, and communities to develop which suit South African linguistic repertoires and multilingual practices.

**Writing-rights - teens need spaces for publishing**

While the m4Lit project focused on reading, teens seem to need spaces for their writing. Other than Facebook, none of the existing mobile applications accord them the kinds of ‘writing-rights’ associated with ‘owning’ a channel, which they had, albeit in a limited way, on the Kontax mobisite. The Kontax mobisite suggests that many teens would enjoy producing texts with more staying power than the transient lines of a MXit chat, or distributing their writing and other creative productions across broader networks and accessing larger global audiences than those they can recruit from their local neighbourhood and schools or from the South African mobile networks. A social platform for teens’ user generated content which provides a space for publication of poems, lyrics, and stories could be a very valuable contribution, and could address other aspects of digital literacy and introduce teens to more universal web conventions.

Finally, approaches to sharing writing and written texts via bluetooth would not incur bandwidth charges and could contribute to literacy development through teens’ existing networks and P2P practices. It is particularly telling that current software applications for mobile reading are not built into phone operating systems, often assume a copyright model, and do not also allow writing and publishing.

**Opening networks**

Currently access to a teen audience depends on having the budget to run a MXit campaign or persuading MXit to host the content for free and then adapting content to fit the MXit mold – MXit proved to be a far more successful way of engaging a teen audience than setting up the independent kontax mobisite. From an educational perspective MXit’s dominance is developing a highly specific form of Internet literacy, which does not allow teens easy access to general web conventions. Fostering open alternatives to MXit is thus a key priority for more democratic and diverse uses of the mobile publishing space.
Who is excluded from the mobile Internet?

As a final note, while celebrating and validating the literacy practices of urban teens, it is important not to forget that teens who live in rural areas may be excluded from initiatives such as m4Lit, and from other similar projects currently under development.

The imbalance between urban and rural users among Kontax subscribers relates to a combination of factors related to language, literacy, the costs of mobile communication and GPRS-enabled phones, and other aspects of mobile internet access. The inter-relationship of these factors and how they affect mobile internet access, the nature of public discourse and individuals’ freedom of expression should be a key priority for future research in this area.


Deumert, A. (2010) Kik cc: Supporting Indigenous Literacies in the Digital Space. [to be published online at http://m4lit.wordpress.com/]


Vosloo, S. 2010. M4Lit Project report.[to be published online at http://m4lit.wordpress.com/]


## APPENDIX 1: MXIT LEXICON

### TALKING ABOUT LIFE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MXIT Word</th>
<th>English Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>skul, xul</td>
<td>school</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frnd</td>
<td>friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bcoz</td>
<td>because</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>gud</td>
<td>good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chch</td>
<td>church</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hlw</td>
<td>hello</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>whn</td>
<td>when</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>anx</td>
<td>thanks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kik</td>
<td>kaloku (now)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>nu</td>
<td>and you?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>beta</td>
<td>better</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mja</td>
<td>moja</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cc</td>
<td>sisi (sister)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TALKING ABOUT LOVE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MXIT Word</th>
<th>English Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>bf</td>
<td>boyfriend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>frnd</td>
<td>friend</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>luv, lv</td>
<td>love</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>kc</td>
<td>kiss</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lvu, luv u</td>
<td>I love you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lyk</td>
<td>like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### PARTING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MXIT Word</th>
<th>English Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>G2G</td>
<td>got to go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>G2B</td>
<td>got to bounce</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2G</td>
<td>have to go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>H2Go</td>
<td>have to go</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BRB</td>
<td>be right back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>abc</td>
<td>always be careful</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### MEETING AGAIN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MXIT Word</th>
<th>English Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CU2MR</td>
<td>See you tomorrow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CU2Nite</td>
<td>See you tonight</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ndeza</td>
<td>Ndiyeza (I will come)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### TALKING ABOUT LONGING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MXIT Word</th>
<th>English Word</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mcu, msu</td>
<td>miss you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mngu</td>
<td>missing you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I C I CN B2 C2U</td>
<td>I wish I can be too close to you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### INQUIRIES ABOUT CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION
wud  What are you doing?
wuup2  What are you up to?
wu@  Where you at?
wts↑  What's up?
wrw  Where are you?
wuw  Who are you with? / What are you watching?
hud  How are you doing
HWUDNG  How are you doing

SHARING CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION

wtv  Watching television
l2m  Listening to music
lib  Lying in bed
lob  Lying on the bed
jc  Just chilling

DODGING

wtpvar
nvm  Nevermind

LAUGHING

LOL  laugh out loud
LMAO  laugh my ass out
LMIMP  laugh me in my poes
LMFAO  laugh my fat ass out