

# Chapter 22

## Digitization and Consumerization of Identity, Culture, and Power among Gen Mobinets in South Africa

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter seeks to explore the role played by mobile social networks (MoSoNets) in mediating and constituting, and in helping digitize and consumerize identity, culture, and power among Gen Mobinets (low and middle income black youths) harnessing MoSoNets in South Africa. It focuses, especially, on MXit and MYMsta as two instances of MoSoNets. In this case it makes the following dual argument: notions of identity, culture, and power need to be reconceptualized in the age of MoSoNets; and MoSoNets lend themselves well as convenient avenues for Gen Mobinets to leverage multiple digital identities and multiple digital cultures on the one hand, and to engage in digital power gaming and to experiment with digital power on the other hand. Most crucially, underlying the triple notions of identity, culture, and power in the era of MoSoNets is the architecture of digital and virtual affordances within which identity, culture, and power are embedded and through which they are mediated. Against this backdrop, the chapter, first, outlines the framework within which its main argument is located. Second, it characterizes how identity, culture, and power are mediated by Gen Mobinets through MXit and MYMsta. Third and last, the chapter outlines future directions related to its main argument, thereby concluding its discussion.*

### INTRODUCTION

For most young people, emerging social participation technologies (e.g., Facebook, QQ, Cyworld, Skyrock, Orkut, Mixi, Twitter, and YouTube) are both technologies of choice and lifestyle technologies. As these emerging social participation

technologies become profoundly embedded into the everyday social fabric of young people, comprehending the latter's identity and subjectivity becomes a matter of comprehending how they individually and collectively relate to and interact with these technologies. In this instance, it is estimated that today there are 1.5 billion people who use and have their profiles in social participation technologies (see Das & Sahoo, 2011). Of these

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a majority are young people. Every time young people utilize these technologies, they tend to engage in what Jenkins (2006) calls a participatory culture.

There is a parallel development in respect of young people in South Africa. That is, youths in South Africa - especially low and middle income black youths - leverage social participation technologies in the form of mobile social networks (MoSoNets), thereby engaging in participatory cultures. These youths are referred to in this chapter as *Generation Mobile Internet Users (Gen Mobinets)* because of their propensity to use mobile device powered MoSoNets. At the same time, the chapter perceives these youths as displaying attributes of *Generation Ys* and *Millennials* (see Basso, 2008; HDI Youth Marketers, 2009; Roberts, Foehr & Rideout, 2005) and as being polyfocal and possessing multitasking skills (Peters, 2005). Two of the MoSoNets that these youths use are MXit and MYMsta. Both MXit and MYMsta are South African based MoSoNets. As Gen Mobinets use these two MoSoNets, not only do they engage in participatory cultures but they also participate in their digital identity construction and expression. In this way, they encode a digitization of their identities and cultures. Additionally, in doing so, they participate in digital power geometries.

Another development in this mix is *consumerization*. This phenomenon encompasses two related processes. First, Social Web technologies are designed and developed for consumers as end-users who actively adopt these technologies (e.g., blogs, wikis, Facebook, YouTube and MXit) and use them for creating and sharing content or knowledge as producers and consumers (*prosumers*). Second, these technologies are adopted by businesses for enterprise purposes (Cuel, Louis, Delteil, Jack, Leger, Rizzi et al., 2008; Signorini & Hochmuth, 2010). However, in this chapter consumerization is a conceptual tool employed to refer to a practice in which Gen Mobinets' identities and cultural lifestyles are encoded and mediated in MoSoNets as consumer items. So,

when identity, culture and power are mediated digitally through MoSoNets such as cited above, they become digitized and *consumerized* through these MoSoNets. This practice then lends itself to digital identities, digital cultures and digital power. Additionally, digital identities, digital cultures and digital power become configured, reconstituted and dispersed through digital discourses embodied in MoSoNets through which they are mediated.

## **RECONCEPTUALIZING IDENTITY, CULTURE, AND POWER IN THE ERA OF MOBILE SOCIAL NETWORKS**

A theoretical framework within which this chapter is located is a postmodern, postcolonial and discourse analytic framework. This framework brings together three scholarly traditions: postmodernism, postcolonialism and discourse analysis. These three terms often engender a lot of definitions and debates. Besides, they are usually associated with several variants. As such, here only a brief explanation of the conceptual tools underpinning this framework as drawn from these terms is presented. This is done so as to illuminate the way in which they are intended to be used in articulating the overarching theme of this chapter. For example, postmodernism opposes and critiques foundational knowledge and meta-narratives based on modernity (e.g., universality of knowledge, objectivity, neutrality, etc) and the fixed identity and subjectivity. Rather, it embraces multiplicity, difference and fragmentation – multiple, fluid and shifting identities and subjectivities, and partial knowledges (see Chaka, 2010a; Lyotard, 1984; Nkoane, 2009). Moreover, it encapsulates the notion of post-Fordism which, inter alia, entails: commodified and marketable knowledge and information; multiple literacies and skills; and globalization of capital, culture, knowledge and information (Chaka, 2010a; see Koç, 2006). In a similar vein, power in the postmodern era is

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