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# 'Uphi?'<sup>1</sup> ICTs and the mitigation of distance in a South African township



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## ARTICLE INFO

## Article history:

Received 11 September 2014

Received in revised form 10 February 2015

Accepted 5 March 2015

Available online 25 March 2015

## Keywords:

Migration

Mobility

Mobile phones

South Africa

Langa Township

## ABSTRACT

Langa Township, located in Cape Town, South Africa is home to many internal South African migrants and external African immigrants. As a mobile population, many Langa residents have embraced the mobile phone as a means of securing relationships with family members living elsewhere, while also maintaining relationships forged within the township and South Africa in general. Addressing the role of technology in a historical perspective, this article addresses the various ways that mobile phones have both mitigated and exacerbated distance for residents while also acknowledging the advantages and disadvantages of mobile phones for different generations of migrants in the township.

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## 1. Introduction

This article looks at the use of new Information and Communication technologies (hence forth, ICTs), particularly the mobile phone,<sup>2</sup> among residents living in Langa Township, located in Cape Town, South Africa. Mobile phones are increasingly becoming part and parcel of everyday life in an African context where the devices are used in creative and innovative ways towards the benefit of users across the continent. Existing scholarship around the innovative ways that mobile phones have been used in a variety of countries in Africa (see Refs. ([39]: Chapter 7), [13,16,36], [55,54]) paint a different picture from what many would expect, given the perception of Africa's (homogenous) technological marginality. Drawing on [13] definition of the term marginal which suggests that

'marginal' people face a range of real and imagined circumstances that make them feel disadvantaged, the article shows that mobile phones have facilitated a slight decrease in disadvantageous circumstances. These circumstances include lack of, or limited access to communication technologies and means of transport. I draw on this notion of the marginal person to develop an argument towards the role of communication technologies in a historical perspective for residents where previous lack of transport and communication alternatives to writing letters and sending them manually stunted physical mobility and intimate relationships between residents and their families at home. While not all residents' willingly embraced new technologies like the cell phone, some residents found relief in its functions and its ability to compress time and space. The article will also show that mobile phones have not always proved beneficial in this regard.

This article argues that mobile phones, and the Internet for some, did indeed mitigate distance for some residents seeking to maintain relationships with their non-migrant kin at home. Similarly, mobile phones proved burdensome for other residents who could not avoid social obligations and remittance interactions [20,34,46] because the

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<sup>1</sup> 'Uphi?': "Where are you? in isiXhosa. IsiXhosa is one of South Africa's eleven official languages.

<sup>2</sup> The terms 'mobile phone' and 'cell phone' are used interchangeably throughout the article.

mobile phone, as an extension of the body [48] and a leash on which migrants could be controlled ([35]:270) meant that non-migrant kin could demand participation in these obligations even from afar. I maintain that residents who allowed themselves to be used by their phones in this way did so when they could afford to send remittances and the like. Others strategically avoided such obligations by not answering phone calls or responding to text messages.

The data presented in this article is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2011 to 2012 for my Doctoral research. I employed a qualitative research method, relying heavily on participant observation and both formal and informal interviews towards the collection of rich ethnographic data. Among other day-to-day activities, engaging in participant observation allowed me to accompany residents to one of Langa's cell phone repair shops where conversations about technical and social cell phone problems were frequently carried out. I was also able to assist whenever possible, which were admittedly not many, repairs done to residents' cell phones with workers of the cell phone repair shops. The relatively small size of Langa Township, 3.09 km<sup>2</sup> (or 1.19 square miles) (Census 2011 – Main Place “Langa”) made it possible for me to explore and meet with residents in most areas during the research period.

Though I engaged with dozens of residents for the purpose of my research, findings are based on 29 residents who became my “key informants”. Speaking with male and female residents of all ages, I was particularly interested in the older generation (both local and foreign residents alike, who were likely to be settled in the township) for a comparison of their experiences of mobility and communication before and after mobile phone integration. In this context, I considered residents over 40 years old as ‘older’. I assumed that older participants would present opportunities to discuss memories of migrating, oscillating and communicating between Cape Town and their ‘homes’. Of the 29 key informants, nine were ‘older’, ranging in age from 40 to 76. In addition to participating in a variety of activities with them, the 29 key informants were all engaged in at least two formally recorded interviews (recorded with my digital voice recorder) ranging from 34 minutes to an hour, as well as interviews recorded manually in my field note diary.

In Africa, patterns of mobility and migration, for many, are survival tactics for long-term security and sustainability ([12]:1). Migration is often influenced by a host of factors including socio-economic, political and environmental instabilities ([45]:7). Within the African continent, South Africa is widely perceived – at least from afar – to be a country of success and opportunities for those seeking greener pastures [1,27,30]. The steady influx of internal migrants into the Western Cape for life-enhancing possibilities has proven this province to be one of the most desirable in South Africa [44,45]. The truth however, is that many African immigrants who enter South Africa end up living in far less appealing situations than expected; the opportunities and greener pastures that lured them there being virtually unattainable. Opportunity-seeking immigrants from around the continent sometimes find themselves struggling in unexpected ways.

Many opportunity-seeking African immigrants end up living in poor and geographically marginal areas like townships and other informal settlements in South Africa. They generally end up populating these areas alongside their local disadvantaged black South African counterparts. In Cape Town, Langa Township, built in 1927 [10,51,52], is currently considered the oldest township in Cape Town and was built on the periphery of the city. The township was originally built for the re-housing of residents of Ndabeni, the first ‘location’ in Cape Town, South Africa ([10]:1), [40]. The term ‘location’ was used to describe an area that was considered ‘native’ territory usually administered by the central government of the Cape. Langa Township was a settlement allocated as one of the main reserves for the occupation of black, isiXhosa-speaking Africans, most of whom were not originally from the Western Cape but came mainly from the eastern part of the Cape Province as migrant laborers [29], ([51]:1, 6), [52]. As a settlement originally centered on mobility, most of Langa's population is mobile. Through my own Doctoral fieldwork where I was interested in the role of ICTs within various aspects of Langa's population, I learned that Langa continues to be constituted by mobility, as the majority of residents are from the Eastern Cape or other African countries who travel throughout the year to and from their ‘homes’.

As a mobile population, Langa residents continuously oscillate between various places, namely their home and host communities. These residents, an amalgamation of internal, external and transnational migrants have developed multiple relationships that span across multiple borders [3]. Migration always entails physical displacement [34] which can potentially hamper the development of various types of relationships between mobile and sedentary individuals as distance sometimes significantly disrupts the flow of communication. ICTs, however, have been credited with eliminating former obstacles of distance. As ICTs are known to facilitate one's ability to ‘travel while sitting down’ [2], they offer a range of possibilities for socializing and “bridging mobilities” [35]. In this sense, the potential for ICTs to bridge mobilities and offer virtual means of communication can work toward relieving the degree to which some mobile bodies may be rendered socially (and physically) immobile.

There is an overwhelming perception of the mobile phone's ability to mitigate distance in its perceived ability to compress time and space [7,8,13,26,42]. This article reveals how Langa residents' mobility and movements to and from Langa, and their desires to remain socially active with those near and far, have been affected by new mobile technologies. Mobile phones, with their increased data capabilities, have allowed us to manipulate time and space in ways beyond that of earlier technologies [26]. Studies have shown that in South African townships, poor and urban, internal and external migrant dwellers are using mobile phones to stay in touch with rural relatives hoping to maintain healthy or consistent communications with places and people distanced from them through mobility. They are often equally preoccupied with creating and maintaining relationships with people in their new ‘homes’ ([56,13,14,33]). This information offers a useful entry point to the basis of this article.

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