

# Assessing virtual culture exchanges: Internet social networks and global interactions among Windhoek youth

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## **Abstract**

*The rapidly growing presence of old and new media in postcolonial Namibia, particularly from the decade after the turn of the Millennium, has significance for cultural and lifestyle transformations in the country. Formerly entrenched social identities, shaped by restrictive colonialism and indigenous traditions, appear to be under pressure as shifts become apparent in the face of cultural globalisation. This article examines the characteristics of change from the perspective of young Windhoek adults' experiences of Internet social networks. The research constitutes a cultural study that addresses the current knowledge gap regarding how the Internet is increasingly situated in youth identity and cultural lifestyle spaces. Social networks appear to be changing the cultural landscapes of Namibia, if the evidence is accepted, and youth are at the cutting edge of cultural transformations wrought by new media such as the Internet.*

## **Introduction**

This article focuses on youth interactions made possible through Internet communication, and considers the sociological consequences of new media in terms of cultural shifts within Namibian contexts. It provides recent evidence on youth linkages and electronic sociability with 'others' in distant external international settings. It asks: "what are youth doing" with electronic media, while at the same time wishing to know how youth are changing themselves and their identities in terms of social and cognitive outlooks. In cultural terms, is this new-found and novel means of communication impacting on the outlooks of young people? Is the Internet changing Namibian culture? If the answer is 'yes', then through what specific practices is this occurring? The present discussion is based on extensive qualitative fieldwork utilising grounded theory methodology undertaken among young users of media in Windhoek in 2011, although the primary focus here is specifically on youth encounters with the Internet. The evidence indicates that social change is in-process, being noticeably centred on and through youth culture in the city from within recently constituted communication processes of new media.<sup>1</sup>

From 2007, the possibilities for connecting with the global 'outside' through Internet connectivity became markedly enhanced with the introduction in Namibia of 3G

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<sup>1</sup> A total of 62 participants between the ages of 18 and 26 years were interviewed in-depth for a total of 80 hours using grounded theory methodology as a basis for establishing a theory of media in Windhoek. The fieldwork was part of doctoral research undertaken through the University of Stellenbosch.

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communication networks (Larsen, 2007). This has taken a further step forward with the launch of 4G technology among Namibia's relatively narrow base of service providers from May 2012. Internet has expanded exponentially in terms of access, with Namibians gaining rapid entry and considerably enhanced improvements in data-access speeds through desktop computers, laptops and, substantively, through cell phones. Cell phones have emerged as the cheaper prime platform for poorer citizens to use the Internet (Campbell & Park, 2008; Van Binsbergen & Van Dijk, 2004).

Internet practices have come to represent considerably more than a technical activity, emerging to signify profound novelty, and to occupy a new practical space in the lives of younger Namibians. Related to this, the phenomenal rise of social network sites such as Facebook, MySpace and 'chat and comment' destinations such as Skype, Twitter and a plethora of online news publication sites, have established virtual communication inroads into societies and cultures beyond Namibia and Africa, entrenching opportunities for unique forms of instant, globalised social interaction. Such mediated contacts and actions provide the means to transcend the narrow knowledge and opinion base of people's immediate cultural locale. The consequences of these new social media practices are as yet poorly understood (Boyd, 2008a), and barely researched in Namibia. What therefore are the practices and more importantly, the sociological consequences of these mediated forms of interaction in the electronic global social meeting places provided by the Internet?

### **Virtual global connections: Rise of the Internet in Namibia**

What is the media background to the communication shifts that appear to be impacting on youth lifestyles in Windhoek? In Namibia, the Internet has grown in significance in little more than ten years with the bulk of this access expanding exponentially in less than half that time. The Internet remained a minority medium up to the early 2000s. From less than 1% of Namibians connected in 1999, there were estimated to be 148,414 Internet users, or 6.9% of the population by December 2011 ([www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)). Access and intensity of use has been retarded by high prices for bandwidth and ungenerous data capping, but this may change from mid-2012 as Namibia's first direct submarine cable link with the rest of the world is operationalised. Prices are then forecast to fall, assuming market trends experienced in most other countries operate in similar ways within the Namibian economy (Totel 2010).<sup>2</sup> There is a danger that the narrow cartel of Namibian service providers and a history of weak competition in the sector, may limit the full cost-saving potential of this development.

The Internet and cell phones are experiencing what has been termed *media convergence*, a recent media trend, whereby technological change concentrates different media into fewer spaces, meaning the combining of media technologies and mediated practices into fewer digital devices (Kung, Picard, & Towse, 2008; Jenkins 2006). For example, cell phones are now used to search the Internet and listen to radio, rather than just for speaking to people; while laptops provide online television, downloadable movies and music, or a means to communicate globally with others with considerable immediacy or even in real-time on social networks or Skype. This media convergence eliminates or reduces reliance on older conventional media, and significantly changes personal strategies to access entertainment and practical or educational content. The Internet outdoes traditional media which have represented more passive consumer practices, by allowing interactive, participatory, and even reflexive involvement. In Namibia, cell phones are a significant part of the trend for

<sup>2</sup> Internet connections in the country before 2012 were always indirect, either via South Africa or Botswana which adds significantly to usage cost.

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ever-closer contact nationally, and with the global beyond. From just 20,000 cell phone users in 1998, there was over 1.5 million in 2011 (Economy Watch, 2011). Mobile telephony has resulted in a revolution in personal media communication, in that multi-tasking phones allow for broader communication potential than was previously possible, including public debate and civic exchanges that bypass restrictive official state media (Sarrazin 2011; Tyson 2007). Given the pace of these changes in Internet access and the devices used to attain it, the 2012 6.9% official national figure may be a serious under-estimate of people with a working Internet connection. Internet use tends to be chiefly urban-based, and is likely to be significantly higher in Windhoek anyway, compared to other parts of the country.

Specific uses of Internet in Namibia have received little attention, although the research presented here draws on what seems to be widespread engagement with Internet social network sites (Fox, 2012). Social networks can be defined as media forums found on the Web that allow for contact, sociability and virtual interaction with others who are distant and not physically co-present. They are meeting places where views and opinion on lifestyle and fashion, relationships, social, political and more general interests, can be shared and debated online. Many Namibian social network users tended to be in contact with people in other parts of Namibia, other African countries or, just as commonly, in Asia, Europe or the Americas. Moderately well-off and, more obviously, affluent young people in Windhoek have a Facebook account, while knowledge of YouTube, Twitter and other social network sites was high. There proved to be surprising interest and even some participation in social networks by lower-income individuals; for example, a car guard had a Facebook account which he exclusively accessed on his cell phone. All experienced a general fascination in other options that the Internet provided such as film and music downloads and access to news and entertainment (Fox, 2012).

Many youth who were interviewed regarded 3G cell phones as a desirable means of accessing the Internet than a conventional computer, although a majority used both. Facebook was demonstrated to be the most favoured social network site, although others mentioned were Skype,<sup>3</sup> Twitter and various personal commenting or blogging platforms. All interviewees had joined Facebook after 2007, most from 2009. Its sudden popularity represent, as will be established, sharp and significant cultural change in individual media actions in Windhoek. Skype usage seemed to be not far behind, although problems with connection speed meant that audio rather than audio-video communication proved the only possibility for most interviewees. The rise of Facebook and similar sites owed much to improvements in Namibian telecommunications from 2007/8 in line with reduced tariffs, and the introduction of 3G connections (Larsen, 2007). MySpace was barely mentioned, an indication of how such sites can rapidly decline and be superseded: a fate that Facebook itself could eventually experience. Facebook was the most popular social network site among Windhoek participants, and this is borne out by recent statistics, Namibia had 6.2% penetration or 134,140 Facebook users as at 31 December 2011. Globally, Facebook reports that it has 799 million users with its largest growth sectors being in the developing world ([www.internetworldstats.com](http://www.internetworldstats.com)). Only one participant in the Windhoek research used an alternative site, this being a Russian social network called *Aska* <sup>4</sup>, being chiefly preferred because the individual had studied in Russia for several years, and had friends there.

How did Windhoek youth utilise social network sites? Participants variously commented on the means provided by social networks not just to talk to people who were complete

<sup>3</sup> Skype is not strictly a social network, although many consider it as such. It has video conferencing and voice communication capability, but also allows texting.

<sup>4</sup> *Aska* being derived from a slang word in Russian meaning 'let's get together'.

strangers that they might never meet offline; often they kept in contact with family and friends, but also felt the need to display their personality, self-image and personal and social identities. Self presentation, and even the pursuit of some degree of celebrity, was a major attraction of sites such as Facebook. The following sections offer a practical representation of social network practices, often in the words of the research participants themselves regarding what they did, and represents both the attractions as well as their negative experiences in mediated virtual worlds.

**Self-celebrity: Presentations of self online:** “They don’t want to see the real you” (Diane)  
One of the chief attractions of Facebook for participants was the opportunity to engage with a type of media that allowed the self and self-identities to be publicly displayed. Couldry (2003, p. 107) has written of the emergence of modern self-celebrity, first created out of reality show formats such as the heavily-exported *Big Brother* franchise. He argues that these shows combine “ordinariness and celebrity” in similar ways to social network sites. Members of the public are able to present themselves as a personality to everyone else. Social networks extend the reality television premise that anyone can be a celebrity, be visible ‘out there’ before large audiences, establishing platforms for public self-presentation.

Goffman’s 1959 thesis that people in their daily public relationships ‘present’ themselves in the dramaturgical manner of an actor on a stage, takes on a new dimension in social networks. Goffman (1998 [1959], p. 77-78) believed that individuals socially presented idealised versions of themselves to others through self-managed performances that carefully concealed defects of character or imperfection that might spoil public identities. He states that

contrived performances we tend to see as something painstakingly pasted together, one false item on another, since there is no reality to which the items of behaviour could be a direct response ... If a performance is to come off, the witness by and large must be able to believe that the performers are sincere ... Some performances are carried off successfully with complete dishonesty, others with complete honesty; but for performances in general neither of these extremes is essential and neither, perhaps, is dramaturgically advisable.

The best of ourselves is displayed while the worst is hidden in a performance that is always a contrived social drama. We are never entirely honest or dishonest in our presentations, and a certain degree of veiling of ourselves, Goffman says, is essential for self-security and goal success. He used the metaphor of ‘masks’ as a way to describe concealment of real identities, with presentational strategies in public determining success or failure of actual performance, manipulation of others being never far away. Such strategies of Windhoek youth to present idealised selves and unspoiled identities were apparent in their Facebook interactions. Twama said that self-display was one of the obvious purposes of Facebook and social sites. She liked this aspect, stating that “I like Facebook for the displaying of yourself. I change the picture each month if I have time, and I update my status according to the things that have happened to me. My life is out there, and I share it with those other people.”

Diane valued it also for identity displays with online friends, stating candidly “it’s not about being in touch with relatives for me. For me it’s more about popularity, being popular and seen. You can only do that on Facebook. It’s presenting your photo and lifestyle to the world. We like to upload pictures of ourselves and say ‘here we are’. It’s showing off really, but it’s fun. People want to be popular.”

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Diana confirmed that for many young people ‘presenting yourself’ was a primary motivation to use Facebook. Idealisation of the self and flawless identity management was essential. She said the thing I find really interesting is how perfect people want to appear on Facebook. They wouldn’t want any old picture, but they want you to see this perfect picture; no mole, no freckle, they wouldn’t want a normal face. Like, I have no makeup at the moment, and I wouldn’t want them to see this. They don’t want to see the real you.

She added an eccentric example of one of her online friends from South Africa who liked to present herself as though she was in one country one day and another the next. She had got the idea from a French film called *Amelie*.

I know this girl who puts fake pictures on [Facebook]. The other day, she had this photo of her standing by the Eiffel Tower, and she said she was there. The next day the photo was of her in New York. But she wasn’t. She just edits the picture and puts her face there. I don’t know how she does it.

Sonny, a noticeably conservative, even traditionalist participant in Focus Group Four, disliked this type of exposure and openness of self-identity. It was not ‘cultural’ to do that, but ‘a new Western thing’. He said:

These social networks like this Facebook, I just don’t like them. I just don’t want everything about myself to be exposed out there for all to see. I am private, a bit reserved. Why expose myself so publicly like that? I don’t like my things to be known.

Grace had a different concern regarding negative presentation she had encountered. She discussed the problem of male displays that sometimes occurred. Speaking about Skype, she said that:

[men sometimes] strip off their tops when you are speaking and show themselves and I say you cannot do that in our culture. Men like to show themselves, their physique to you. Some men only use Skype for sexual reasons. So I cut them off. There was this old man on Skype who once said to me that he wanted to see my ass [is embarrassed], so I cut him off. Women also show themselves more on Facebook where they show their bodies in mini-skirts and brief clothing. But it’s hard to avoid that.

Some sought fame through online display. Mumba said that she sent sound files of herself singing through Facebook. She hoped that a record producer would hear and see her so that she could ‘become famous’. She said that she had heard it had happened. Diana critically commented at the lack of pragmatic use of the Internet, saying that: “many don’t use it that practically. They mainly show themselves off and think they’ll be famous.”

These represent examples of how social network participants expropriate global media for their own ends. While power is being directed at them from institutions of Western media, we should not underestimate the degree to which youth capture and use media for shaping their own cultural practices and identities, irrespective of the power processes from media institutions which they also undeniably encounter (Rantanen, 2005; Van Binsbergen & Van Dijk, 2004).

### **Sharing cultures and global lives**

Social network interactivity was a window into other people’s worlds, lives and cultures. Making contacts in other parts of Africa, Europe, the United States or China proved to be a significant attraction to the Windhoek research participants. They provided a great deal of discussion on the cultural possibilities of sites such as Facebook. Miller’s (2011) study of Facebook in Trinidad also reported this culturally attractive side to people in that country.

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A small Caribbean island was effectively linked to people in various nations in some sense, either to connect to families who had immigrated to the United States or Europe, or to be part of the greater global community in the culture sharing possibilities the Internet provided.

The opportunities for these intense interactions frequently gave insights into how people lived elsewhere in the world. The participants became temporary roving anthropologists or ethnographers discovering ways of life that were sometimes a revelation to them. They frequently compared other unfamiliar lifestyles with their own.

Diane mentioned how surprised she was in discovering facts about India through her Indian Facebook friend. She heard about caste discrimination, the low status of women, the intense situationality of Hindu religious beliefs in the lives of many, and about social problems such as intense poverty for many Indians. She had also become aware that India was now a major emerging economy. She admitted that she 'knew nothing' about these things before her Facebook contact: "I used to know only Namibia. I didn't have any knowledge of elsewhere. Now I know about India, the US, places like that. It has opened me up."

In their joint interview, Charlotte and Rushida, both chemistry students, stated that the culture sharing aspects of social networks interested them most. They 'loved' having worldwide friends who told them the following things:

Rashida: I do it [Facebook] with friends all over the world. There are friends and relatives and people I have not met. I like talking to people in America and China to see what people do that side. I like to see their side of their lives.

Charlotte: We are learning a lot, for example from people in the USA who I speak to a lot. They tell us things like 'we are going to town shopping', things like that. They talk about how they dance when they go out at night. We compare our lives and their lives, their style and ours. They are not really different from us, but it sounds a bit more fun. They show you their pictures and you see their clothes and how they look, and you realise that side is a little cheaper than this side. They show the scenery of their cities or their towns. I would love to go there.

Interviewer: Do you tell them about Namibia?

Charlotte: We tell them about Namibia and show them pictures of our ocean, our sea and coastline. They say that they would love to come and see it here, how it is. They know of these [film] stars that have come here and films that have been made here and they ask if we know these places. They want to know which places here the movies are shot, where the stars are staying.<sup>5</sup>

Discovery of other matters, such as insights into economic catastrophes in rich Western nations following the crash of Lehmann Brothers in the United States, emerged from social network communication. Talia, an Afrikaner, gave a picture of the reality of the global economic crisis or 'credit crunch' that first hit the United States economy in September 2008, quickly spreading to other parts of the globe.

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<sup>5</sup> Namibia has become a frequent location for making Hollywood films. Angelina Jolie and Brad Pitt came for three months in 2006 for the birth of their child which was widely reported globally. She had previously starred in a film that had been made outside Swakopmund in 2003.

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She said:

my US friends have told me a lot about the economic problems. It really comes across when you talk with them. They say the economy is really bad there. They're so depressed sometimes. One person's dad recently lost his family business, and he says they are struggling financially now, where they were very well off before. It was tough for them, and I can relate to that, as my own family depend on a business.

Grace gave some specifics on cultural differences which were the topic of conversation. She said of social networks as being a means to 'culture share':

I do it to find out about other parts of Africa. Like the weather: I ask is it raining, snowing, things like that. I ask about their cultures also. How do they dress, what do they eat. I know this Chinese guy who tells me about these disgusting fish they eat, I don't know what they are called. He shows me pictures of it and I say 'I can't eat that!' I see that they eat with those [chop]sticks, and I say 'do you really eat with those'. They also ask a lot about Namibia. What is here, how do we look, what are the beautiful places if we come to visit, and I tell them. As you might say, we are culture sharing.

While Miller (2011) confirms this desire of participants to gaze into other societies and share global cultural options potentially generating cultural change, other studies are sceptical about the far-reaching effects of this. Kung, Picard and Towse (2008, p.94) state that "there is no overwhelming proof that globalisation or cultural change is taking place because of people getting online and using Internet", adding that domestic websites remain the most popular in many countries. These writers do not, however, address or examine the impact of social networking, which seems a different order of cultural possibility altogether.

### **Family interconnectedness through social media: resolving diaspora**

The research established a powerful connection between the Internet and modern international migratory patterns. Several participants used social networks to make connections with family members who had moved to other parts of the world. 'Keeping in contact' was an important ontological<sup>6</sup> and emotional need for Windhoek participants. Social networks and the Internet were found to be a means to overcome diasporic displacement and dispersal of family members through emigration, a means to reconnect and to establish interconnectivity with relatives thousands of miles away. According to the International Organisation for Migration (2010), emigration out of continents such as Africa achieved historic proportions from 2000 onward.

Many Windhoek participants now had friends or family living permanently or for long periods abroad. Most used the strategic opportunity of social networks to re-establish or maintain contact. In these senses, Happy explained the advantages for him quite well, speaking of the rediscovery of lost family.

I have found lost relatives in other parts of the world by looking for people with my name. I found a lady who I discovered to be a relative in the USA. I talk a lot to my brother who lives in Canada on Skype, and you no longer have to write letters to keep in touch. Very few write now since social networks. I think it's a very good thing. It allows us to live as a family even though we are scattered and not seeing each other. It helps with a sense of belonging.

<sup>6</sup> Ontology is a philosophical and sociological concept referring to the study of the conditions of existence of an individual or a society. It is frequently applied to matters of culture and the existential foundations of belief systems.

Strong evidence presented itself that participants used social media as a counter-diaspora strategy. The term 'diaspora' refers to people-dispersal, originally derived from the Old Testament in relation to the scattering of the Jews from ancient Israel following the Persian conquest of the seventh century B.C., but widely applied today to all groups, nations or communities who through oppression or by choice move from their homeland. This well explains why Facebook is experiencing a greater expansion of take-up in the developing world compared to the developed (*The Financial Times*, 15 June 2011). Mass migration to other areas, primarily Europe and North America, over the last 15 years has fragmented African families, scattering kin members globally (United Nations Development Programme 2009). Facebook represents a strategic resource to locate, contact and maintain interaction with relatives across this global diaspora landscape (Tsagarousianou, 2004). Crispin described how contact was established with his own dispersed kin, explaining:

[On Facebook] you find lost family members, family who have moved, even gone out to Europe. Some are in England, four cousins and an aunt are there. There was no communication from her for four years. Then she saw my name on Facebook and contacted me thinking it was my dad. But my dad had died, so I said no, he is deceased, but she kept contact with me. Most of my family, uncles and aunts, contacted me through Facebook. I didn't contact them, they just found me. It's so useful for that. It brings our dispersed family together. It's really changed everything.

In their joint interview, Guido and Julia, girlfriend and boyfriend from a white Afrikaans background, differed in their Facebook connectivity. Julia contacted her 'white' diaspora, while he solely used it to keep his Windhoek friendship network active. She said

I joined [Facebook] in 2008. It's a good way to stay in touch with friends and family overseas. We have German and Swedish family on my grandparents' side and we can talk regularly and share stories easily. It's better than email. The broad international side of my family makes it stretch between here and Europe. We are speaking to each other nearly every other day or at least on a weekly basis.

It follows that an important function of Facebook is to bring the diasporic global family 'virtually' together. Adeyanju and Oriola (2011, p.22) state that the 'insatiable desire' of Africans for a new life in Western countries, and subsequent large-scale migration, has created a fragmentation of the African family. Sites like Facebook establish an online space to maintain regular family contact and share news. Presentational matters, in Goffman's sense, are vital to the migrant. Diasporic Africans use social sites to communicate legitimising performance impressions of their 'successful' lives abroad, while needing at the same time to suggest they maintain 'culturally appropriate' lives away from home. This ensures that parents, friends and peers culturally approve of their new existence. Such aspects were present in Windhoek in communications with friends and family who had emigrated elsewhere, exhibiting achievement symbols while avoiding displays of excessive distance from Namibian customs and tradition.

Miller's (2011) Trinidad Facebook study expressed similar diasporic and presentational patterns. Fuchs's (2009, p.108-109) quantitative Austrian survey, which included immigrant Africans, found that social networks were predominantly used to keep in touch with existing friends and family at home and abroad (59.1%), and less than one third (30%) used them for establishing casual online friendships in other parts of the world with people they were unlikely ever to meet. Fuchs (2009) and Miller (2011) emphasise the importance of this global means of instant interactive familial communication. Both writers regard social



networks as positive and educational beyond mere entertainment. However, both also stress the harsher side of online contact, which Windhoek participants strongly noted.

### **Abrasive media in online encounters**

An area of cultural conflict on social networks arises from how people address each other, converse or generally interact on them. Namibia is a country where formality is mostly carefully maintained in social encounters. However, online communication often displays a raw approach in discussion, frequently resorting to harsh criticism and unrestrained language or prose, including abusive (*The Guardian*, 24 July 2011). Other cultures may find such discourse hard to accept. This type of encounter with media can be described as *abrasive media*, which typified how Windhoek participants experienced certain individuals on the Internet.

Andrew was a participant who had an interest in conspiracy theories which he debated with others online. He liked to comment and blog on conspiracy matters on the Internet, but showed some unease at the reactions his online points of view sometimes led to. He found these encounters sometimes severe, and at times hard to take. He provided an example based on a significant news event, which had occurred a few weeks before his interview:

After the alleged assassination of bin Laden, I commented on this. I said how much I thought it was a staged event, that he was killed to raise Obama's ratings. Gradually, it went on to a war of words [with other commentators]. Then it got personal, insulting each other. It got to abuse and swearing with some guy from the [United] States. He was saying 'what do you fucking know? Excuse me, you're from a fucking third world country'. That sort of comment. I would say that bin Laden has been dead for years already. The situation was invented to increase Obama's ratings. I told this to the American guy but he was quite rough.

Andrew expected discussion to be confined to 'reasonable bounds' that excluded insult and swearing, while admitting that it was difficult to meet those expectations out on the Web. He said that "if you met some of those people in real life, you would be fighting them."

Bertha enjoyed rough Internet characters who were sometimes interactively 'amusing'. She mentioned a Windhoek man who she said was widely known among friends and acquaintances on Facebook for being aggressive and outrageous.

There is this person's wall I always read, and that person is always, always swearing! He's in Windhoek, but he is not my friend, I didn't request him, he's just appeared on my page. But he knows everything, what's going on where, everything! He's always the one to know people's weakness, always the one to know who did what, always the one to publish what's going on in Windhoek. He's just not polite. If you criticise him, he comes back at you and is very nasty. That's why I would rather read him than reply! People are afraid of him, but also there are a lot who support him. He is quite popular.

Lebius, a more conservative participant, liked Facebook but reported that he restricted contact with people outside the country because they were 'always too rude'. He mentioned past abrasive encounters as an unpleasant downside of the Internet, but also people that 'reveal your secrets', presumably people who knew him. He explained: "some bad experiences have happened. People try to irritate you with their comments. They can

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be very direct. They talk about people in a bad way. That I don't like. Things like Facebook can often be culturally inappropriate. I may stop it soon."

Social media were widely perceived in Windhoek to breach culturally-accepted standards, being criticised on several occasions on cultural grounds. Over-expressive language displayed publically on the Facebook 'wall' or through close friends via the inbox, shocked some Namibian users. Mumba said she believed that such language contradicted the behaviours and expectations of her own culture. People did not swear in public according to her Kwanyama tradition, unless they were drunk or 'not responsible' for themselves. She said: "in some ways, things like Facebook are creating a culture clash, we are changing. The language is also bad, and really hard comments. They get angry about something and swear endlessly. Many of my friends do that, and I complain. But they say it's not my business. It was culturally difficult for participants to overcome these reservations and fall into this spirit of fierce, even aggressive debate. It was just 'not Namibian'. Yet in other ways the participants could transcend such conservative coyness in surprising ways when it came to the internet strangers they encountered.

### **Talking to strangers on social networks**

The stranger is close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves features of a national, social, occupational, and generally human, nature. He is far from us insofar as these common features extend beyond him and us, and connect us, only because they connect a great number of people (Simmel 1950 [1908], p. 98).

Windhoek participants were often reserved individuals, yet they had the courage (even foolhardiness) to be questioned in depth online by a stranger about their lifestyles, and were able to engage with unfamiliar in the global outside. Simmel regarded the stranger as a fact of modern life which had replaced 'community'. In large-scale societies where impersonal social relations had become the norm, so too had strangers. They were people we meet or usually only see in passing that come and go in our lives, or are glimpsed from a distance. They are those we never entirely comprehend. They represent what Simmel labels 'the larger unknowable' or greater society beyond the immediate locales of 'familiar' such as family, friends and work colleagues. Simmel says we are curious and wonder about them, because they are also 'us', and to others we too are strangers. Maybe the Internet is changing this social configuration, as the unknowable 'other' is increasingly integrated, often unpredictably, into our evermore mediated lives.

Talking to strangers on social networks fascinated Windhoek youth. It represented novelty, but also a vital connection to 'out there'. Many of them sometimes deliberately chose to maintain contacts with people as far away as possible from their own nation and culture. While intimate contact with family and friends was desired and valued, so too were remote encounters with 'exotic', but sometimes alarming, strangers of the global outside. They had online friends 'who were not quite known' to them from India, China, the United States, Sweden, Britain, Kenya, Angola and South Africa, to name the most cited homes of these strangers. Social networks brought the strangers to their laptops or their cell phones from great distances. As Simmel said, strangers are close to us and far from us. The Internet offers the option to bring them intimately, frequently uncomfortably, closer. Hilma said:

Maybe they are strangers, yes, but I feel I know them well. They share my interests such as music or fashion. One of them is quite religious, so I write to him about the Bible and share religious views. He's quite nice. He's an American. I chat about anything with them: music, my problems, anything big that has happened. They like to hear a lot about my life

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here. They tell me what their lives are like. They live in United States, but one is a girl from Brazil, another from Japan.

Mumba said that she tried to use Facebook and the Internet to obtain information on fashion and lifestyle issues. People or friends that could provide this were favoured, but she said that she did not now want to become as intimate with them as in the past. There was a reason for this, as will be seen. She kept discussion strictly to her topics of favoured conversation, because strangers could be deceptively more than the way they presented themselves. They materialise as another side of *abrasive media*, even representing an occasional predatory threat.

Several female participants mentioned uncomfortable experiences on Facebook involving implicit or explicit sexual suggestions from people they had never met. The term for this in the United States and Britain is 'cyberstalking', and it has been cited as a major Internet problem in the perceptions of many (*The Guardian*, 8 April 2011). Diana complained that Facebook was unable to keep predators off its site.

They latch on to you. I got a message from a guy in Angola, and he was writing that I like your face, you are so beautiful. He said he was coming down to Namibia to see me, and he wanted to meet me. This sometimes causes a problem, because if my boyfriend happens to see these messages, he gets the wrong idea and he thinks I am using Facebook to get in touch with men. He thinks I am encouraging it. There is nothing that I can do about it, except ignore them.

Rianna, a Focus Group participant, also reported being contacted by 'weird' individuals. I get these strange guys. They say [exaggerated tone] that they like your hair, they like your eyes. Some will even inbox you with messages saying that 'I have just seen your profile picture. Oh, you are so beautiful, I want to meet you! I'd like to marry you'. Sometimes they are Namibians; they say that they don't care what my tribe is. They just pop up. I sometimes reply and say I am a married woman, and they don't care. They are saying these things to hundreds of other people, one day telling this person they love them, the next day they love another. It is just going on and on [smiles wryly]. These characters have proposed to a thousand others before!

Most participant experiences did not result in a face-to-face meeting: in the case of Mumba, it did. As just mentioned, an incident had led to her trusting no one of social networks, and had made her reserved. She explained a disturbing encounter with a male Facebook contact she had included in her list of friends:

I had one unpleasant experience on Facebook. It was awful. It was a request from a stranger. He said he liked me, wanted to know me, to date me, things like that. 'Can you be my girlfriend', things like that. He would keep checking my profile and writing, a bit like a stalker. He was always there when I went into my page. It went wrong when he wanted to meet me and I stupidly did so. When I met him, it was really an awful experience [becomes uncomfortable]. I don't want to talk about it. It was very bad. I cut him out all together after that. Since then, I am very careful about new strangers, as I don't want that to happen again. Apart from that, I like Facebook, but I don't want contact with such people.

This account points to the dangers and personal security risks that social network users confront, of which Livingstone and Brake (2010) have warned for children and young adult social network users. Elsewhere, Livingstone (2008) argues that better media literacy is

needed to raise awareness of the perils of predatory online encounters in relation to social and physical dangers, including developing defensive learning strategies. In Mumba's case, as a female she was clearly not fully cognisant of the inherent dangers.

Boyd (2008b) has written of the radical implications of social network sites for previously held social norms and codes of behaviour. Lines between openness, and former practices of concealment of personal information, have blurred and broken down online. The private becomes a domain open to all, with Internet participants imagining greater degrees of anonymity and protection than they actually have. Friendship loses its generic meaning, as those with profile accounts on social networks tend to have fifty, five hundred or sometimes a thousand or more 'friends' with whom they imagine they can share intimate secrets and discuss deeply private information.

Boyd (2008b, p. 14) argues that many young people are now aware of and experience trepidation at this disintegration of private space, stating that social networks "rupture people's sense of public and private by altering previously understood social norms". A sense of exposure and invasion has set into people's attitudes, leading to demands that sites like Facebook provide better architectures of privacy to curb the free flow of private information. This particularly relates to its News Feed system, effectively engaging in surveillance and exposure of account users to the stage where it becomes very difficult for them to control personal online zones. Use of pseudonyms and better concealment of identity perhaps needs to be learned by youth, alongside acquirement of greater media literacy skills (Zhao, Grasmuck & Martin 2008).

### **Youth, media and the Internet**

How can the Windhoek research presented above be equated with and contextualised within wider international studies of youth and media? The qualitative insights into media practices among youth in Windhoek raise the necessity of examining issues of youth culture, and the social and ontological imperatives that drive youth to engage with the Internet and media generally. The character of 'youth' itself should also be articulated. Social science treats youth as a flexibly active category that is socially assembled, and based on acquired lifestyles. Buckingham (2008) regards youth as a social and historical construct determined by time and place, and where commercial and mediated worlds shape its definition. Melucci (1992, p. 56) echoes this, arguing that 'youth' is a cultural process where age measures have little bearing on what sociologically defines youth. He says:

People are not young because, or only because, they have a certain age, but because they follow certain styles of consumption, or certain codes of behaviour and dress.

Young people shape youth identities fundamentally through modes of consumption, out of which a bricolage of identity and lifestyles are moulded. Much of this is increasingly symbolic in character in addition to being material. Miles (2000, p.70) writes of the omnipresent positioning of media in the consuming character of contemporary youth, stating that no viable studies of youth can today ignore this. He adds that the mass media have emerged as important for the young, and they have shown remarkable abilities in mastering each new communication innovation. Youth tend to show strong reflexive skills of utilisation, while revealing uneven degrees of resistance or submission to its commercial pressures. Miles (2000: p. 84) says that media represent a world where youth can be largely free of adults, although they may be vulnerable to entertainment and advertising which has a vested interest in maintaining a certain type of consuming consciousness and identity among them; but this is not to say they are automatically manipulated dupes.

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On how youth sociologically engage with media, Willett (2008) says that young people use media as a symbolic resource to build their own centres of sociability and youth identities. Television and music have arguably done this for some time in African and other contexts. Rushkoff (1997, p. 13), in his United States study, refers to the young as 'natives of chaos' who in an individuated and complex age are better adapted to the demands of the shifting contours of modernity than most adults. Their immersion in modern popular culture has prepared them to cope with and manage the social changes occurring around them. Media provides the paradigm and the practical means for their negotiation through contemporary worlds.

Mediated youth abilities do not automatically shield them from the powerful capitalistic commercial pressures they daily confront in media and beyond. Willett (2008:50) states that any study of youth and media is required to explore the tension between young people as acted upon by societal forces, and seeing them as independent actors in their own right. Willett (2008, p. 54) adds that:

it is undeniable that youth constantly come into contact with commercial pressures and imperatives, whether using new or old media ... young people can be seen as "bricoleurs," appropriating and reshaping consumer culture as they define and perform their identities, and in some instances rejecting or simply ignoring marketing techniques and discourses.

Yet their agency is framed within commodity spaces that are deeply conditioned (Willett 2008, p. 56). In her own field of study, online Internet, Willett sees this as an important area for expression, development and access to alternative cultures for youth, albeit one where virtual spaces may be deceptively less free and open than many may realise. In relation to the Internet, Subrahmanyam, Greenfield and Tynes (2004) say that it is critical to view this as a highly valued new social environment for youth in which universal adolescent issues pertaining to identity formation, sexuality, and self-worth are explored in a virtual world. Going online for accessing and discussing with others intimate information relating to sex and personal relationships has not been available to such a degree previously. Chatrooms and social networks, as confirmed by the 2011 Windhoek research, offer enormous potential to shape both personal and social identities. New media provide the space for interactive and constant contact with others via mobile phones, the Internet and email, essentials now that social life is virtually networked and human contact is more and more 'distanced' rather than conventionally face-to-face. Larsen, Urry and Axhausen (2008, p. 656) call this 'networked capital' which is described as "the capacity to engender and sustain social relations with people who are not necessarily proximate, and which generates emotional, financial and practical benefit." Youth, including in Namibia, are increasingly skilled in accessing and exploiting networked capital.

Symbolic qualities such as status are valued. Boyd's (2008a, p. 129) study of social networks in the United States revealed peer pressure to use either MySpace or Facebook in order to be 'considered cool' by other young people, therefore typically representing a form of cultural capital. Social networks offered youth the means to display their identities and "write themselves into such sites" (*ibid.*), but also to manage idealised self presentations, in Goffman's (1998 [1959]) sense. Online profiles become the primary means to self-management which Boyd argues is an acquired social skill shaped by experience. She sees social networks as spaces of self-development that are a vital means to access both national and global public life. Official or other protestations in Namibia that media needs to be regulated and restricted to protect youth, may be doing them a disservice by denying them a participatory and social role. Boyd says that the exceptional civic space

they provide for the young should not be controlled, given that many studies of youth and media have a tendency to incorrectly address the relationship between the two sides as a moral or social problem. She warns (Boyd 2008a, p. 137): “we are doing our youth a disservice if we believe that we can protect them from the world by limiting their access to public life. They must enter that arena, make mistakes, and learn from them. Our role as adults is not to be their policemen, but to be their guides”. However, it is argued by other writers that such freedom should be accompanied by greater densities of media literacy, whereby youth have a stronger capacity to both understand, negotiate and successfully manage the dangers, as well as the opportunities, that Internet and social networks present to them (Livingstone, 2008; Potter, 2004).

### Conclusion

This discussion has attempted to establish both a picture and an analysis of Internet social network engagements in relation to patterns of cultural transformation in Windhoek among youth. The conclusions reached are that the Internet has moved decisively into the lifestyles of young Windhoekers as a resource, as a form of self-presentation or a window into other cultures, as entertainment or to access novel or sundry ideas and experiences, and even for sensual or intimate possibilities. Social networks and new media generally, are a portal to a vast realm of intriguing possibilities, at the same time emerging as a normalised social phenomenon in everyday experience.

The Internet is widely favoured by Windhoek youth over older media chiefly for its non-passive, strongly interactive social character. It is a medium that makes possible *virtual connectivity* with other cultures, nations and individuals. Internet engagements involved a complex interplay of self and social identities in the Windhoek research setting. Certain participants consciously transcended or had begun to move away from social and cultural backgrounds or identities, spurning the demands of older conservative identifications. Orientation to tradition was at times firmly rejected, and those who did this were conceptualised as *cultural expropriationists*, being youth who used media for cultivating identity image or for planning cosmopolitan lifestyle goals (Boyd 2008a; Marneweck 2006; Rantanen, 2005). A core of youth was entirely practical, using social networks to develop information and knowledge to shape intellectual outlooks and future life planning. However, mediated engagements were not in all cases utilitarian, involving instead utilisation of media for novelty and play. Yet, for many it was a powerful social tool that could take them ‘out there’. The Internet is decisively the most immediately global of all media, although it is argued by some to undermine conventional face-to-face interactions in ways that change the sociological human relationships we knew in the past (Turkle 2011).

Not everyone was comfortable with the importive cosmopolitanism that has accompanied this medium (Held, 2010; Thomson, 1995). Mutual contact between the Namibian local and the global was potentially the transformative *locus* for lifestyle patterns, and, more importantly, the altering of existing ethnic and national identities. Culture itself was seen as under threat. Some youth were conscious of the Western and American corporate empires behind the Internet and other media. Nevertheless, media’s appeal in terms of utility and entertainment partly overcame these reservations. Yet a core of people remained firmly critical of the over-public and self-display aspects of new media, and voiced urgent challenges to the perceived ‘Westernisation’ and undermining of local values. There were lines of resistance within such individuals. In terms of youth defences from the more immediately negative consequences of social networks and the Internet, particularly its abrasive or predatory side such as cyberstalking, a need to raise levels of media literacy

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savvy among Windhoek's youth was evident. It can be easily forgotten that new media is indeed very 'new' in contemporary Namibian society. Youth do not necessarily yet have the social and cognitive tools to ensure reflexive control of and safeguards over their favoured media. However, an argument for restricting media to them was not considered a wise course, and other critical ways to develop defence faculties are required.

New media have become entrenched in youth cultures in ways not initially realised before undertaking the research before 2011, revealing within Windhoek what Wasserman & Jacob (2003) have called 'shifting identities'. It has been argued that the Internet and social networks represent important consequences in terms of social transformations. Cultural and identity shifts, including sociological vicissitudes in thinking about self and identity among youth, point to changes in patterns of Namibian culture as globalising processes enter, and hybridly mingle with, national values and local symbolic representations. Internet is currently an irresistible force of change. It offers through its social sites a decisive media form that is more immediate, interactive and virtual in character, a means to 'talk' and communicate in real-time, or close to real-time, to engage in a discourse with other distanced individuals and groups in a potentially unlimited realm of connective possibility. Traditionalists and conservatives with agendas for containing and retarding the social consequences of the Internet are likely to face a strong challenge from youth, who have increasingly come to regard the freedom of personal and social expression it provides, as a core part of their lifestyles and self-development. Beyond the control and media literacy issues raised by the arrival of social networks, the final overriding outcome of these cultural shifts appears to be a cosmopolitan one for Windhoek youth.

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