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Cellphones and romantic relationships of young women in urban informal settlements in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

Cellphones have impacted on people's intimate sexual relationships. Using the framework of relationship formation, maintenance and ending, we explore how cellphones and attendant social media have impacted on relationships among a group of young women living in urban informal settlements in Durban, South Africa. We conducted in-depth repeat interviews with 15 women enrolled in the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures trial, as well as group discussions and light-touch participant observation. Our data show that cellphones and social media are central to women's sexual relationships and allow women greater control over relationships – particularly their formation. However, cellphones and social media also enable greater control and monitoring by partners. In this study, cellphones were central in establishing (or not) trust in relationships, as well as being gifts, sometimes given by men to demonstrate love, but often becoming a snare for women who then struggled to end relationships because the phones 'remained' the property of the man. We conclude that while cellphones have created new spaces and opportunities for women's agency, overall the wider social and material forces of women's existence were deeply constraining and were the main driver of patterns in women's relationships.

Background

Young people's sexual relationships in sub-Saharan Africa have been under the researchers' lens for the last three decades with much published on the search for love and respect within the turmoil of multiple concurrent partners, infidelity, crises of trust and navigation of unplanned pregnancy and HIV risks. Over the last decade the arrival of affordable cell phones, the Internet, data and social media, has impacted young people's romantic and sexual relationships. Whilst this has created change, there is also emerging evidence of the use of these technologies in reinforcing

existing patterns of gender power and relationship dynamics (Eckstein 2016; Fernet et al. 2019; Stephenson, Wickham, and Capezza 2018; Van Ouytsel et al. 2016; Archambault 2011; Stark 2013).

A central question about the impact of cellphones on romantic and sexual relationships - which we refer to here as intimate sexual relationships - has been the extent to which these have expanded women's agency and power in relationships, or simply created new ways for male partners to control women, potentially exacerbating and creating new forms of violence and coercion (Fernet et al. 2019; Archambault 2011; Ling and Horst 2011). Some researchers have emphasised how cellphones have expanded women's social and sexual networks, and enabled women to engage in relationships in clandestine ways (Archambault 2011), suggesting women's agency in intimate sexual relationships has grown. In contrast, other studies have emphasised how cellphones and social media, have enabled male partners to more easily and regularly monitor their female partners (Ling and Horst 2011), including where they are and who they are speaking to (Fernet et al. 2019). For instance Stephenson, Wickham, and Capezza (2018) emphasise how male partners sought to monitor the comments made on photos that their female partner's have posted online, a new form of control and psychological abuse. Other studies have shown a strong overlap between (intimate partner violence) and cyber-abuse within relationships (Yahner et al. 2015; Wakunuma 2012). A parallel discussion has taken place about how cellphones and social media increase the potential for mistrust in intimate sexual relationships, which can lead to physical violence (Eckstein 2016; Archambault 2011). Nonetheless cellphones can also be used to resist violence. Women have used them for help-seeking, to overcome social isolation, and to share ideas about relationship problems and how to respond to these (Baillot, Cowan, and Munro 2012; Maxwell et al. 2020). Furthermore cellphones have been used as an intervention entry point to enable help-seeking through the development of safety planning apps (Eisenhut et al. 2020).

Cellphones have also opened up a new economy of exchange and control within relationships, with expectations being placed on male partners to show affection by buying airtime or data, and more infrequently cellphones (LeClerc-Madala 2003; Masvawure 2010; Hunter 2010; Wamoyi et al. 2019). Cellphones have also been positioned as an instrument of economic control by partners, with Wakunuma (2012) highlighting how married women in Zambia described having their cellphone use controlled by their husband through the need to ask him for airtime. Those more celebratory of the role of cellphones, have suggested that for some women cellphones can become ways in which to extract resources from men, without having to engage in sex (Archambault 2011).

In this paper we look at the role of cellphones and social media, primarily Facebook and WhatsApp, as described in the narratives of a group of young (18-30 years) women living in urban informal settlements in South Africa who experienced high levels of poverty and violence. While we started with a broad reading of this data, we focused in to explore the role of cellphones in women's intimate sexual relationships. We framed the analysis in terms of the framework of relationship formation, maintenance and ending, which provides a way of conceptualising the multiple roles

cellphones may play a role in enabling young women to assert control in relation-ships, and resist male power, while also revealing how male partners can use the same technology to their own ends.

Our analysis reveals that cellphones and social media are now woven into the lives of women in relationships in urban South Africa, allowing women to have greater con-trol over certain moments within these, particularly relationship initiation, and how they use phones and social media for certain types of partner surveillance. Cellphones however are also used by male partners as an extension of their repertoire of coercive control over female partners. We conclude that whilst cellphones may have created opportunities for strengthening women's agency, overall relationships were still pre-dominantly shaped by the wider social and material forces prevailing in communities, which were deeply disempowering for women.

Methods

We conducted qualitative research within the Stepping Stones and Creating Futures (SSCF) intervention trial in urban informal settlements in eThekwini Municipality, South Africa, (Gibbs et al. 2020). Urban informal settlements are shacks/houses primarily without formal electricity and water supplies provided by government, and often emerging in chaotic formations on vacant land (Huchzermeyer and Karam 2006). The SSCF intervention aimed to reduce women's experiences of intimate partner violence and strengthen livelihoods, and was delivered by trained peer facilitators over a 3 month period from March to May 2016 to small groups of women (Gibbs et al. 2020).

As part of a process evaluation to understand pathways and barriers to change (Willan et al. 2020), a trained female research assistant recruited 15 women at baseline from two of 17 clusters of women receiving the intervention. Clusters were identified based on ease and safety of access. All women in the two clusters were invited to par-ticipate in the study (approximately 20 per cluster). Overall, 15 women agreed and attended interviews, and were interviewed twice at baseline, then later at 12 and 18 months ($n = 12$, $n = 13$ respectively), generating a total of 55 interviews. In addition, in one cluster we conducted approximately 80 h of observation with women to under-stand in greater detail young women's daily lives. In a second cluster we undertook group-discussion and created photo-posters using photographs the women them-selves had taken, using a PhotoVoice approach, which focused on women's experien-ces of safety and reproductive choices (see Table 1) (Willan et al. 2019).

At baseline (February 2016-September 2016), interviews focused on women's lives, families and livelihoods, as well as their relationships and experiences of violence. At 12 months (February 2017-September 2017) and 18 months (September 2017-February 2018), we asked similar questions, with a focus on understanding whether, and how, things had changed. At no point did we ask directly about the role of technology or cellphones in women's lives and relationships. Interviews were conducted by a trained ethnographer in a location where audio privacy could be achieved, ranging from par-ticipants' homes to fast food restaurants, lasted between 45 min and 1.5 h, and were digitally recorded. Data were collected in isiZulu, and later translated and transcribed into English.

Table 1. Participants.

Name and age at baseline	Intimate sexual relationship at baseline? (duration)	Living arrangement at baseline	Employed at baseline	Data collected
Enhle (21)	No	Lived with extended family, child lives with sister	No	4 interviews and observations
Oluwethu (26)	Yes (3 years)	Lived with partner, not child	Yes	4 interviews and observations
Ntombi (21)	No	Lived with natal family	No	4 interviews and observations
Nkanyezi (unknown)	No	Lived with baby, mother and siblings. Older children lived with paternal family	No	2 interviews
Thembeka (29)	Yes (3 years)	Lived with grandmother, siblings, occasionally partner	Yes	4 interviews and observations
Thobile (22)	Recently ended	Lived with natal family	No	3 interviews and observations
Sebenzile (28)	Yes (15 years)	Lived with partner and son	Yes	4 interviews and observations
Sthelo (26)	Yes (5 months)	Lived with natal family	Yes	4 interviews and PhotoVoice
Noluvuyo (19)	Yes (3–4 years)	Lived with aunt and child	No	4 interviews and Photovoice
Thuleka (18)	Yes (4 months)	Lived with mother, stepfather and sisters	Unknown	2 interviews
Ndoni (25)	Yes (5 years)	Lived with her children and siblings, sometimes partner	No	4 interviews and PhotoVoice
Langa (22)	Yes (recent)	Lived with siblings	No	4 interviews and PhotoVoice
Khanyisile (22)	Yes (Married 4 years)	Lived with husband	No	3 interviews and PhotoVoice
Nomvelo (21)	Yes (10 months)	Lived with father and three sisters	No	4 interviews and PhotoVoice
Zoleka (23)	Yes (5 months)	Lived with mother and siblings	Yes	4 interviews and PhotoVoice

We undertook an inductive analysis of the qualitative data although the data were not specifically collected for this analysis. The first author conducted a thematic analysis (Flick 2002) using three pre-defined broad codes: relationship formation, relationship maintenance, and relationship ending, to identify when the technology was discussed. The first author then undertook an open coding of the data under these three themes, with smaller codes being grouped into coherent and theoretically relevant themes, which are presented here. The other authors reviewed the analysis and provided suggestions about interpretation, missing concepts and the meaning of the thematic analysis.

The study received ethical approval from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and the South African Medical Research Council's ethics committees. All women provided written informed consent for the main trial, and separately for the qualitative study and PhotoVoice process. Participants were provided with food and drink during interviews and were reimbursed for the costs of travel. Pseudonyms are used throughout.

Findings

The 15 women were aged between 19 and 29 years old at baseline and the majority were in an ongoing relationship. Over the study period, women described the ups and downs of these relationships, as well as the formation and ending of others. In general, women had somewhat complex relationships with the men they had children with, as well as with other men, often to survive economically, but also because of love (Willan et al. 2019).

Of the 15 women, twelve reported some form of experience of intimate partner violence in their lifetime, primarily physical and emotional (Willan et al. 2020). Ten women had children, though many of the children did not live with them. Few of the women had regular work, with many starting and ending jobs intermittently throughout the project. Women's lives were hard, as they were expected to wake early, cook and clean and get the children ready of school, and then either seek work, or stay at home, before repeating the process in the evening.

Throughout the interviews, observations and PhotoVoice discussions, women described their use of cellphones as physical objects and communication devices that were intimately involved in all aspects of their lives and relationships. Many described how cellphones were important in overcoming the boredom of daily life, spending many hours, when they had the data, on Facebook. Not all women had cellphones all the time: one woman did not have her own cellphone but shared a phone with others, while two other women, for periods of time, shared cellphones, with access being mediated by friends, family members or their boyfriend. No other forms of technology were described (e.g. the use of laptops) and women primarily described using WhatsApp or Facebook, including Facebook instant messenger. In South Africa, access to mobile data is expensive, and because of this access to the Internet/data was sporadic, with some women describing accessing the Internet via local public wireless connections, which are not common, but with most using one-off data packages bought by themselves or others.

Relationship formation

Women described how, by enabling access to Facebook and WhatsApp in particular, cellphones provided a way of meeting men, and expanding women's intimate sexual relationships beyond their normal networks. Several women described meeting men on social media, who they subsequently started dating. Oluwethu, who was 26 and had lived with her partner of three years, explained how she used Facebook and WhatsApp to 'judge' her current boyfriend's suitability:

Interviewer: How did you and Vusi meet? How did you end up living with him?

Oluwethu: I came here specifically to live with Vusi. I met Vusi in 2015. Our story is weird [laughs] we met on social networks. He phoned me and we started WhatsApp-ing each other …

Interviewer: How long after meeting in real life did you officially start dating?

Oluwethu: Maybe it took a week [laughs]. It took about a week because he was sending me airtime. I saw that he was a good man with love, his profile picture always had him and his family. He didn't have other women [in the photos]. (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

Women also used their ability to upload pictures and 'status updates' on WhatsApp or Facebook as a way of indicating their availability for relationships. Enhle, who was 21 years old, and did not have a current boyfriend described how she would meet men in 'real life' and then start chatting to them online:

Enhle: … Or if you see that he isn't too talkative, ask him where he has WhatsApp [i.e. which number he uses]. Then, if he does give you his number, make sure that you tell him that you are not interested in anything, you just want to chat with him … and then put sexy pictures as your profile picture.

Interviewer: Sexy how?

Enhle: Photos where you have nice clothes on, and the poses are nice. Also make sure that your status makes it clear to him that you are single and available.

Interviewer: Give me an example of such a status?

Enhle: You will write: "Single and Available. Young and Fresh" or "Thank you, but I am not interested in Blessers [sugar-daddies]". (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

Another participant, Thobile (22 years old), described how she had over 800 friends on Facebook, as she accepted any request that she received, and proactively reached out to people, to start chatting to them. In this process she had met a pastor, who while they never met, she established a form of relationship with: "They decided to exchange numbers and began chatting on WhatsApp: "We chat about a number of different things, I talk to him about things that I can't talk about with other people."" (Fieldwork notes, 2016). Thobile stressed how she had some form of control in the relationship. When the pastor tried to introduce a sexual element into the relationship, she could back away. As she described: "Occasionally [we speak] … The first time … he had asked me about my boyfriend, he asked whether I was having sex with my boyfriend, I ignored him. He [then] called to find out why I was ignoring him".

WhatsApp and Facebook, as Thobile's story illustrates, created the opportunity for young women to initiate online only relationships with men. These virtual relationships gave women a sense of fun and excitement, as well as a level of control, which they may not have had in face-to-face relationships. Langa (aged 22), who had recently started a relationship, and who had over 1000 Facebook friends described this type of relationship:

Interviewer: You're chatting [messaging online] but haven't seen each other?

Langa: Yeah, we have never met.

Interviewer: Are you chatting and calling each other, or you just chat only?

Langa: We chat only. But calling him? No.

Interviewer: Were you dating on Facebook?

Langa: Even on WhatsApp. And we were dating just fine, calling each other, you see? We dated and he ended up saying that we should meet and I said "No" (Baseline 1, in-depth interview)

Online relationships also gave women a way to overcome something of the boredom they experienced in their everyday lives. Zoleka (21 years old), for instance, while having a primary partner of about five months standing, had started private chatting with a man she met online:

> Interviewer: What was it about this guy that made you chat with [with him] more and more, and [then] move to private chat?

> Zoleka: I don't know. I really don't know. But I found myself talking to him and it was fun. It was a nice change, because when my phone rings it's Ntobeko [her online boyfriend]. When I get a message it's Ntobeko, Facebook messages, [it's] Ntobeko.

Relationship maintenance

Women described three main ways in which cellphones were embedded in 'maintenance' of their primary relationship. First, cellphones and airtime provided a means through which men could demonstrate love for their partner. Secondly, cellphone messages, call histories and social media content, impacted on trust in relationships by creating suspicion or evidence of infidelity, or conversely demonstrating or establishing trust. Finally, many women described the ways in which men's control and violence centred around cellphones.

Demonstrating love

For young women in urban informal settlements high levels of poverty, combined with dominant expectations of gendered relationships meant men's economic provision was both necessary, and an important demonstration of love. Cellphones, and more often airtime (referring to both airtime and/or data bundles), became ways in which men could demonstrate love to their partners, and almost all women interviewed described being bought airtime by their partner:

> Interviewer: What type of things do you typically ask for money for?

> Oluwethu: Airtime. I always need airtime to phone and WhatsApp, so I am always asking for money. When I need sanitary pads, I have to ask Vusi [her boyfriend], when I need cosmetics, I need to ask. (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

In a few cases, women reported men bought them a new cellphone. Buying a cellphone was a much bigger statement than buying airtime, and in a primary relationship, clearly signalled strong romantic interest in a woman:

> Ntombi (21, no current relationship): Yes, so we continued dating and it was nice. He even bought me a cellphone, a Samsung touch screen. I could tell that he loved me. He would also give me money to buy clothes, it was nice and things were going well for us. (Baseline 1, in-depth interview).

However, being bought a cellphone could be a double-edged sword for women, as while demonstrating a man's love, it often came with the expectation that the man who had bought it had a level of continued access to the woman. Ntombi described this in relation to her current boyfriend: "Well, I cannot *not* answer the phone because he bought me the phone. So, I don't miss his calls." The same was true for Enhle. Even when the relationship ended, she felt she had to continue being in contact with him:

Interviewer: Where do you still see him?

Enhle: He greets me on WhatsApp.

Interviewer: Oh you still chat to him?

Enhle: I can't block him. It's his phone, he bought me this cell phone, so I can't block him. (18-month follow-up, in-depth interview)

Establishing trust/creating insecurity

Women described a lot of mistrust in their relationships linked to concerns about their partner's (and their) infidelity, and cellphones played a central role in this. Failure to give your intimate partner access to your cellphone was often seen as *prima facie* evidence of cheating. Oluwethu described how her boyfriend's unwillingness to let her access his phone made her suspicious:

Oluwethu: … first of all he doesn't want me to touch his phone, but he wants access to my phone. He changes his passwords constantly. As soon I figure it out, he changes it again … If he changes his password, it's because he is hiding something …

Interviewer: Has he cheated on you before?

Oluwethu: Yes many times before, and he would deny it.

Interviewer: How did you find out?

Oluwethu: I found out via WhatsApp. I would see things on WhatsApp. After a while of the same shenanigans, I told him I was tired and wanted to break-up. He apologised for all his mistakes. (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

There was a level of inequality in access to cellphones. Men were much more forceful in making women give them access and got angry if this was denied, while women sometimes resorted to subterfuge to access men's cellphones. As Sebenzile commented about her partner: "No, sometimes I say to him 'Why don't you want me to touch your phone, but you touch mine?'". Zoleka described getting the pin-code for her partner's cellphone from him while he was drunk. Other women, however, decided it was better to remain strategically ignorant of what might be on their boyfriend's phone:

Ndoni (25 years old): Also, women shouldn't bother men, like looking through his phone and asking him about his phone calls. As a woman you must keep quiet and pretend like you don't see what is going, although you are aware of what's going on.

Similarly, Zoleka after an argument with her boyfriend about a message on his phone said she would not look through it again: "Because I might get something worse than what I already saw."

Cellphones could also be used strategically by women (and men) to build trust within a relationship. Nomvelo (21 years old), described this in relation to her boyfriend of 10 months:

Interviewer: Quincy is living in Richards Bay [about 200km away], far away from you again. Do you think that has affected your relationship in any way … are you secure in that he is not with anyone that side?

Nomvelo: He is not with anyone, well I don't know of anyone.

Interviewer: Do you look through his phone to keep yourself updated?

> Well, he also takes my phone, and looks through it, I do the same with his. (18-month follow-up, in-depth interview)

When Thembeka (29 years old) accused her boyfriend of three years, Zakhele, of cheating, he symbolically destroyed his sim card in front of her and started to share her phone:

> Interviewer: Which woman, were you her primary target [to bewitch] or did she want to bewitch Zakhele?
>
> Thembeka: She wanted to bewitch me so that Zakhele [would] break up with me. It was one of Zakhele's girlfriends because when he was still with me … he would hide his phone, he would hide his WhatsApp messages, he would get secret calls. When I asked him about it he said: "No, people are bothering me". So, he took out his sim card, destroyed it and said we will only use my phone. Anyone who wants to talk to him will have to phone me. So, we both used my phone for a while, his friends and family would reach him through me. (Baseline 1, in-depth interview).

Symbolic acts to establish trust, such as destroying sim cards or deleting or blocking phone numbers could also be used to mislead people. Noluvuyo (19 years old), recollected how after accusing her partner of 3-4 years - Sabelo - of cheating, he deleted the 'other woman's' number, but in fact just saved it under another name:

> Noluvuyo: … oh wait he then said, "let's delete the number", and we deleted it and blocked it on WhatsApp, only to find that he [had] changed the number and used a different name. Again, his brother tells me that the numbers have changed and that Sabelo has saved her contact under a different name. When I get to the phone, here is this number … [PAUSE] … He told me the truth after I threated to break-up with him. (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

Women also described checking the photos posted on Facebook or WhatsApp to assess a boyfriend's trustworthiness, and commitment to a relationship, as this ensured they were the publicly recognised girlfriend. Langa described this, while remaining concerned her boyfriend cheated on her:

> Langa: And the thing is, he uploads my photographs on his WhatsApp and Facebook, but I guess I can't say I know for sure what he does.
>
> Interviewer: What does that mean?
>
> Langa: He displays my pictures as his profile picture on his Facebook page, or his WhatsApp and I have never caught him calling this person or her calling him while I am with him … and he doesn't hide his phone, he leaves it there. So, I don't know what the story is there, because he has never called or been called (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

Other women like Langa, despite overt displays of commitment on social media, continued having ongoing doubts about their boyfriend's trustworthiness, highlighting the overwhelming sense of insecurity many women felt. Oluwethu for instance remained convinced her boyfriend was cheating on her, despite checking his social media and accessing his cellphone:

> Interviewer: What do you mean when you say he doesn't give problems?
>
> Oluwethu: I won't say that he doesn't cheat. Maybe he does but I never seen anything to make me think that. If he is cheating, he hides it well. I am sure he cheats because he is a man and they do these things. But he hides it well because I haven't seen anything.

Maybe when he chats with women on social media he deletes their conversations, I don't know.

Interviewer: Do you use his phone?

Oluwethu: Yes, I know everything about him. I know of his social media passwords, I log onto his Facebook. I even know his bank pins, so basically I have all his information.

Interviewer: And you think Vusi is faithful in your relationship?

Oluwethu: I suspect he isn't, but I don't have any evidence. (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

Men's control and violence

Women described how cellphones enabled continued, and increased, control over their mobility and friendships (especially with other men) by their partners, and how this could lead to violence. Not only did men check through women's phones but women were expected to always be able to answer calls or immediately respond to messages. This was the case for Langa:

> Langa: He hated it when he couldn't get me on the phone. If I missed his call, he would ask me all kinds of questions: "Why didn't you answer your phone?" And he would leave lots of messages on WhatsApp. (PhotoVoice, session 2)

Thembeka described how by continually calling her, her boyfriend sought to monitor and control her mobility:

> Thembeka: As I was leaving the house my boyfriend phones me and asks: "Where are you going, I can see you, where are you going?" I told him: "No I am going somewhere I will be back shortly." And he responded: "No! Go back inside the house." So I said to him: "Fuck off I am not doing that" and proceeded to VK's house. When I was at VK's house my boyfriend phoned me throughout and I eventually switched off the phone. (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

For Zodwa, not answering her cellphone was just one more reason for her violent boyfriend to hit her, as her friend Enhle described: "Zodwa always gets some beating for minor things such as not answering her cellphone, or not cooking." (Enhle, baseline 2). In these cases, cellphones and male responses around them, were part of a continued pattern of violence, intimidation and control.

Some women described how receiving messages from other men could lead to violence, as these were perceived by partners as 'proof' of infidelity. Sthelo described how her now ex-boyfriend, who was often violent, threatened her with a gun when he found a conversation with another man on her phone:

> Sthelo: He busted a conversation I had with another guy, we are not in a relationship, but he was asking me out … He said he liked me and wanted to take me out, but you know I was stringing him along and I would say that I was busy and so on. So, my ex saw the part of the message where I said: "Sure, sure I will see you" and he took out a gun and said I must call this guy and break up with him. (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

Relationship ending

Women reported mixed experiences of cellphones and social media functioned in ending relationships. For some women, especially where relationships had been long

distance, or were only online, cellphones enabled women to easily end relationships. As Nolovuyo described events, "I blocked him on WhatsApp, and I blocked his calls." Other women described how they changed their number, or else lost their phones, effectively ending relationships.

The ability to block calls and messages gave women some power and control over ending relationships, but men could also do the same. Nomvelo told a PhotoVoice group how her ex-boyfriend simply cut off communication with her, and started posting pictures of his child and the child's mother as an indication of who had become his primary partner:

> Nomvelo: I don't mind the child [as a profile picture] … but putting the mother of the child as a status or profile, no. I don't know what that means. I don't know what he is thinking. I stopped calling him because he doesn't call me. I am the one who is always phoning and chasing after him. He last called me in May [now late June]. He hasn't called me since. (PhotoVoice, group 3)

In contrast, cellphones also enabled some relationships to linger indefinitely. Several young women described how cellphones enabled them to stay in contact with ex-partners, and how these relationships never really ended:

> Interviewer: Have you ever broken up? Have you ever dumped a man?

> Thobile: (laughs) I don't know actually. I don't remember. It's just that, what can I say, I think there are 5 or 6 people that I can say I have been in a relationship with in my life. And most of them still call me. (Baseline 2, in-depth interview)

Enhle also described how she continued to chat with almost all her ex-partners on WhatsApp:

> Interviewer: Okay, so you have broken up with these guys, but you still chat to all of them?

> Enhle: [laughing] I have their numbers, yes … and I block them [laughing] … oh my god, I didn't realise, I still talk to all of them [laughing] (18-month follow-up, in-depth interview)

These ongoing communications with ex-partners functioned in several ways. On the one hand they introduced on-going uncertainty into new relationships, often exacerbating jealousy and related violence from current partners. On the other hand, they enabled women to potentially re-establish relationships later on if they felt this would benefit them and provided them with something fun to do with their time. It was unclear whether these lingering relationships were also financially useful for the women.

Notably none of the women spoke of accessing information about GBV or relationships on the Internet or through Apps. Cellphones were for connection and accessing social media, not to access sources of information.

Discussion

Cellphones and social media have emerged as a new element within intimate sexual relationships of young women in urban informal settlements, particularly over the past 10 years. In our research, all the women described the importance of cellphones, and specifically WhatsApp, Facebook, and Facebook Messenger, in their intimate sexual

relationships and variously discussed how these shaped the dynamics of their romantic relationships from formation, to on-going dynamics and termination. In this way their lives and experiences reflect international research findings (Archambault 2011; Ling 2010). Women also described how cellphones were used as an instrument for male control in ways which were very similar to those described in the pre-cellphone age (Pulerwitz, Gortmaker, and DeJong 2000), particularly in terms of cellphones provided a way for men to know where women always were. On the other hand, cellphones also provided some young women with additional space to take control of relationships, albeit without clearly challenging the overall status quo of patriarchal power.

One area in which cellphones provided women with greater power was in relationship formation as they could review photographs or other social media posts, which provided women with greater information about potential partners, and thus enabled women to make choices based on more information than previously (Van Ouytsel et al. 2016; Fox and Warber 2013). Women also described an expansion of their potential sexual networks beyond their immediate physical location, which others have described as potentially 'liberating' for women (Archambault 2011; Stark 2013; Archambault 2013), although the extent to which these changes led to 'better relationships was not evident.

What was new in this study was the emergence of relationships conducted solely within the virtual realm. Women described 'chatting' to many men exclusively online, providing them with something to do to overcome the monotony of everyday life, with the attention from men provided a boost to their self-esteem. Yet, some of these relationships seemed to go further, with women describing them as 'dating'. Such online only relationships carried less of the overt pressure of 'real, in-person' relationships, and their pace and dissolution could be more easily controlled by women. Reflecting work in the global north (Fox and Warber 2013), these new relationships gave young women space to receive the emotional benefits of attention and 'love fantasy' without risking anything significant. Yet, the question remains as to whether experiences of power and control within these 'online' relationships transferred to 'in-person' relationships, given the highly constrained material and social circumstances in which women lived.

Cellphones played a complex role in women's power in relationships as their use could either create, or undermine, trust in relationships. Among young women interviewed, being the publicly acknowledged girlfriend was vital for respectability (Willan et al. 2019) and cellphones provided a route through which women could monitor the 'competition', by checking men's public posts on social media, and reviewing call-logs or messages, which could provide evidence of fidelity (or lack of it). Such actions offered a way for women to assert some form of control and power within a relationship.

While cellphones providing a means for women to assert some degree of agency in relationships, there were also limits to women's power. In particular, there were gender differences to these strategies, with men openly compelling women to share access to their cellphones, while women often having to find furtive ways to view men's call-logs or messages. Similarly, while women were able to monitor public

photos, they recognised that men might post one thing, but behave differently in private. This contrasts with prior assertions that online content and the cues therein are hard to fabricate (Fox and Warber 2013). Some women made an active decision not to view their partner's call-log or messages, preferring to remain oblivious to what may be happening, because the implications of proof of cheating were that a response would be necessary, whereas rumours and suspicion could be ignored (Archambault 2013).

Cellphones also provides a way in which men could continue to monitor and control women, through processes which Ling (2010) calls 'digital leashing'. Women described being controlled through a range of strategies men deployed, including being continually phoned or messaged, or having their call logs and messages checked; such control being an extension of other patterns of control. Men were also violent, often in response to attempts by women to resist these strategies of control, or because of what was found when searching through cellphones. Prior studies have suggested that the forced sharing of passwords and call records may be associated with cyber violence and physical violence (Van Ouytsel et al. 2016).

Limitations

Despite these insights, this analysis has limitations. Importantly, the analysis was based on data which did not specifically ask women about their use of technology in relationships, and thus we may have missed important aspects of use, such as sexual harassment online, and the ways in which women may establish trust and intimacy through sending pictures. It is likely, given the ways in which technology is used to perpetrate abuse and control women, that more direct questioning about this would have led to greater insight into cyber abuse which is increasingly common (Fernet et al. 2019). In addition, while we followed the small group of women over time, our data were not detailed enough to assess change over time, nor whether being part of a programmatic intervention led to changes in the use of technology within intimate sexual relationships.

Cellphones have become seamlessly incorporated into the scripts of young women's romantic relationships across the full range of relationship stages. The role of cellphones in shaping intimate relationships took place within the material world as well as the virtual world. Overall, while we found that cellphones enabled some women to do relationships differently, fundamentally their relationships remained shaped by the wider material and social processes of the communities they lived in and the lives they led. In a setting marked by patriarchal privilege, opportunities for women to exert real power, with or without phones, were distinctly limited.

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