PATCHWORKED MEDIA: MOBILE DEVICES AND CREATIVE PRACTICE IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

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Extended Abstract:

There has been a recurring narrative in research that revolves around mobile technologies and society, particularly in relation to Africa: that these technologies have the potential to reconfigure and revolutionise the development trajectories of entire countries (Donner & Locke, 2019). Possibilities of real-time collaboration and digital exports, of borderless worlds and global communities are lauded, and have become endemic to these perspectives (Donner & Locke, 2019). But if these narratives are to be the case, then, indeed, the role that mobile devices can play in production (in this case of art, media, and design) is going to have to be something that allows people in the global South to earn a living. Because in spite of the promise, there is a dearth of scholarship interrogating whether mobile ecologies can deliver value in this way for those who lack access to traditional PCs and always-on broadband connections. Can aspiring creatives use the more widespread and affordable mobile technologies to earn a living or gain access to resources which would allow them to do so?

This paper presents an exploration of the creative practices of a cohort of Extended Curriculum Program (ECP) Visual Design students from a university in Cape Town, South Africa (2014). All of these students came from low-income, resource constrained contexts in the townships[1] that surround Cape Town. My research documented the experiences of these individuals, who sit at the intersection of several worlds – between

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[1] In South Africa, a "township" refers to urban areas that were formally designated for people of colour, in their distinct socio-linguistic groupings (separated as black, Indian and coloured) under law in apartheid South Africa. These areas are built on the periphery of cities, are typically undeveloped and consist of low-cost and informal housing.

the township and the University, between casual creativity and profession, between mobile and PC, and between local and global flows of knowledge. In this paper I offer an account of how these young people *become* designers in the digital age. And by extension, where and how platform-based technologies are failing to fulfil the optimistic promises of a "digital economy" (Graham, Economies at global margins, 2019).

Primarily gleaned from interview data with kasi[2] creatives, as well as creative "jamming" (a method primarily used in hackathons and game development) this paper collates the first-hand accounts of creative trajectories – how these young people became aware of their creative affinities and forged their way from school into the ECP class. Throughout accounts, the central role of mobile devices as both facilitator and distributor of cultural production is prominent.

I argue that mobile devices here indeed did offer a kind of "participatory turn" (Perkel, 2011) in providing affordances that were previously not available to young people from such contexts: the ability to take, edit and share photographs, and chat to people who are located elsewhere. Cases revolved around the increasing availability of generative design tools and exposure to associated literacies. These students used their phones to produce selfies, document their art and design, and to start up entrepreneurial branding enterprises. Yet, as Donner and Locke argue, "while smartphones and apps may have massively democratized the means of production, they have correspondingly intensely focused ownership of the means of distribution" (Donner & Locke, 2019).

Owing to high data costs, young people only used services and platforms that were cheap and free. For example, uploading images onto "visual web" (Jain 2015) platforms were generally considered to be too expensive and thus limited the relative visibility of their creative artefacts to interpersonal chat services such as WhatsApp and BBM. Thus instead of participation on Facebook and Instagram, where likes and comments are the capital that drives an online attention economy, young people were far more likely to "grab" (Senft & Baym, 2015) images as digital takeaways and circulate these on a "pavement internet" (Walton, 2014) – sans comments, likes or metadata in general.

While scholars such as Odom, Zimmerman and Forlizzi have argued that cloud computing is offering an experience of media as "placeless, spaceless and formless" (2014), these creatives combined online access and offline storage of digital goods in a manner that is distinct in place (on a particular phone), space (they cannot be accessed from anywhere) and form (measured in data and mobile tariffs). In addition, options made available by the application provided a homogenous selection of styles, which revolved around popular visual design tropes – most notably elements that were derived from a "hipster aesthetic", a style which has been critiqued as contributing to a global "harmonisation of taste" in recent years (Sloane, 2016) and distant from the kasi style to which these young creatives aspired.

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[2] 'Kasi' is slang for "townships" – low-income areas established under Apartheid for people of colour – but also describes a distinct aesthetic and cultural style.

In addition, these tools connected to particular 'creative worlds' (Venter, 2018) but are less than ideal in infrastructuring participation in formal creative industries, owing to their limited capabilities.

In questioning whether mobile technologies can help young South African creatives forge careers or attain resources that could help them do so, the role of mobile technologies is complicated. While these devices offer new emerging creative affordances, and in some cases, can offer means to generate income, the material reality is a different story. I conclude by arguing that instead of these devices offering access to a global network, they, at best, provide the means for young creatives, such as those featured in this study, to a forge a media *patchwork*.

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