

**Cultural intermediaries and the circuit of culture: The Digital Ambassadors project in Johannesburg, South Africa**

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**Abstract**

The question raised by Cheney and Christensen (2001) as to “what a non-Western, non-managerial and non-rationalist form of public relations will look like” (p.182), together with the call made by Gregory (2014) for public relations practitioners (PRPs) to be active social change agents, motivated this paper. The aim of this research is to follow a culture-centred approach and apply the circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) to investigate the meanings that young people (aged 18 to 34), as cultural intermediaries, ascribe to their participation in a digital empowerment project implemented by the City of Johannesburg, South Africa. This research forms part of a larger, ongoing multi-disciplinary research project.

The research highlights the complexity of projects of this nature, the wide variety of stakeholders involved, the significance of structure, the importance of training of cultural intermediaries, and the benefits such intermediaries gain from their involvement. A key finding is that self-development and financial benefit contribute significantly to the success of cultural intermediaries. This paper contributes to the field of public relations by providing an analysis of cultural intermediaries’ contribution to the circuit of culture as influenced not only by production and consumption but also by identity and regulation as seen in the way they represented the meaning created during their experience.

*Key words: Circuit of culture, culture-centred approach, public relations, cultural intermediaries, Digital Ambassadors project, South Africa.*

## 1. Introduction

Currently, research into public relations as a practice aimed at social change and the transformation of communities within developing countries, such as South Africa, is lacking (Macnamara, 2015). Public relations has too often been defined with solely an organisational focus in mind. Moving away from such a narrow definition allows for a paradigmatic shift to occur, one that includes consideration of the cultural economy and the theoretical development of public relations *as practised* rather than as a prescriptive set of rules that dictate how PR should be practiced (Curtain & Gaither, 2005). PR, as a social practice, provides opportunities for bottom-up support, co-creation of knowledge, addressing citizen concerns and the design of projects that empower citizens and enhance collaboration (Hodges & McGrath, 2011, p. 90). Public relations practitioners are seen as ‘influencers’ who actively produce meaning (Edwards, 2013) within a specific context at a particular time (Holtzhausen, 2000). This cultural intermediary role has been explored by various critical, postmodern and culture-centred public relations scholars.

The efforts of cultural intermediaries can influence identity and meaning in the production, distribution and consumption of communication (Macnamara & Crawford, 2013). Public relations practitioners are seen as cultural intermediaries as they are responsible for arranging engagements between various cultures and groups whilst being actively involved in creating a third, or different, cultural identity (Benecke & Oksitycz, 2015). PRPs are seen as “cultural agents operating mainly on the production and consumption levels in order to create meaning through the shaping and transfer of information” (Berger, 1999 in Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p.107) with the meaning manifesting around artefacts, attitudes and behaviours (Edwards, 2013, p. 441). The role of PRPs as cultural intermediaries within a cultural economy is essential, but the influence they wield is not restricted to PRPs only. Due to collaborative practices in developmental contexts, PRPs are often assisted and complimented by other active participants. The culture-centred approach to PR aligns itself with other critical theories in that it recognises and represents ‘the subaltern voice as a legitimate producer of knowledge’ (Dutta, Ban & Pal, 2012, p. 3). Subaltern voices and marginalised groups include those on the fringes of economic wellbeing such as unemployed youths.

The roles of PRPs and other individuals in social change activities are not always clearly delineated due to the co-constructive and collaborative nature of communication (Daymon &

Holloway, 2002). The efforts of PRPs cannot be artificially applied to events (seen as ‘fixing’) but should form an integral part of every aspect of communication, including the histories, personal interpretations and new meanings developed through interactions (Macnamara & Crawford, 2013). The culture-centred approach recognises conflict but, instead of the negative view of conflict adopted within the boundary spanning theory of PR, conflict and difference are seen as inherent to the circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p.108) and are regarded as conditions to be recognised and used to inform future practice (Macnamara, 2015). Holtzhausen (2000) supports this view in stating that new meanings are created within conflict and dissent (cited in Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p.108). A wide range of contexts, each with its unique characteristics and culturally-diverse participants, has introduced the need for a culture-centred understanding of and approach to transformation within a young democracy such as South Africa.

The specific research question investigated in this study was: what meanings are ascribed by young cultural intermediaries to the Digital Ambassadors project described below. The notion of the circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) offers a pragmatic approach to investigate this research question as it defines public relations as “a signifying practice that produces meaning within a cultural economy, privileging identity, difference and power because of the central role these constructs play in discursive practices” (p.110). The circuit of culture approach further positions PR as a culturally-relative practice that takes into account the richness and experience of practices outside the Western, corporate-centred normative approach to PR (Curtin & Gaither, 2005 p. 106; Macnamara, 2015).

Research data were collected through interviews with the Jozi Digital Ambassadors (JDAs), their mentors, and project leaders involved with the Digital Ambassador project of the City of Johannesburg (CoJ). Qualitative content analysis of reflective and progress reports, together with observation during training sessions, was also used in this qualitative study in order to obtain information regarding the role of PR as a meaning-making practice in society. This paper argues that exploring the influence that multi-disciplinary cultural intermediaries may have in a transforming society such as Johannesburg, South Africa can provide insight regarding use of the circuit of culture, and communication for transformation, in communication across cultures.

## **2. Culture-centred approach to public relations**

A culture-centred approach moves away from the view of public relations as a service to organisations with an emphasis on distributing high volumes of information and pre-determined standards of practice and quality. Instead, it moves towards efforts aimed at creating meaning through relationships (Ledingham, 2008). Within such a view, focus is placed on quality and meaningful engagements with stakeholders, interactions are influenced by cultural settings, and the products of these interactions must be culturally sensitive (Ledingham, 2008, p. 226). Macnamara and Crawford (2013) identify the key role that cultural factors such as social values and temporal context play in maintaining and shaping culture, and further call for inclusiveness and an understanding of the dynamic, localised nature of public communication activities labelled as public relations. Culture is seen as key to knowledge creation, perceptions, shared meaning and behavioural change (Dutta et al, 2012).

A culture-centred approach focuses on contextual meaning and theorisation from below, thus providing marginalised individuals with opportunities to actively contribute to the creation of meaning through discourse (Dutta et al, 2012). Hodges (2006) further argues that, in the process of communication, public relations introduces its audiences to new ideas, concepts and practices thus playing an active role in shaping culture and identity. Curtain and Gaither (2005) place contested identities, relational differences and the primacy of power as central to the meaning making practice of public relations. Investigations into power and the control of public relations practices come into play when using a culture-centred approach; such an approach allows for the description of practices as they are, and not as theorists think they should be, thus contributing to the development of much-needed critical and alternative approaches (Dutta et al, 2012, p. 2). Both practitioner and researcher are seen as producers of knowledge. This is based on the recognition of contextual meanings and the development of theory from below, from the contribution of those actively working as cultural intermediaries. A culture-centred approach can be summarised as a critical theory recognising the meaning making role of public relations with meaning being influenced by the culture, structure and context of participants in discursive and interactive moments.

### **3. Cultural intermediaries and the circuit of culture**

The idea that public relations, and other promotional industries such as branding, marketing and advertising, can be seen as cultural influencers originated from the work of Bourdieu in 1984 (Edwards, 2012; 2013) who saw the PR practitioner as a cultural intermediary who “presents and represents culture” (p. 243). The meaning making practices of cultural intermediaries occur through the use of various communication activities, as well as through other influencers such as celebrities, through popular culture, and through normative practices, all with the aim to promote their clients and their products.

According to Edwards (2013, p. 243), public relations campaigns always include a measure of cultural change as they cannot always predict how audiences will create meaning from their messages and interactions. The ability of public relations practitioners to reflect on relevant experiences will influence their ability to make decisions regarding the use of suitable communication techniques for specific audiences (Edwards, 2012, p. 443). This implies that PRPs need to be well-versed in a variety of diverse contexts in order to make the best communication decisions on both micro- and macro-levels. Macnamara and Crawford (2013, p. 299) warn against a superficial form of cultural sensitivity and multiculturalism, and instead call for an understanding of public relations as the creation of cultural and social meaning, as was highlighted by Taylor and Kent (2006) in their study of nation building and PR. In another study, of the role of PRPs as cultural intermediaries in constructing Australia Day, Macnamara and Crawford (2013) identify a number of important factors, namely: an understanding of the historical context of an intervention, an understanding of the purpose and tacit meaning of activities, and knowledge of the decision-makers and role players who create the meaning that shapes public opinion.

Cultural intermediaries should also be well-versed in the use of persuasive communication techniques as well as specific standards of practice. They should also have open association with stakeholders and be familiar with the important role of a public relations professional during planning. Furthermore, they should develop a centralised theme and focus to action, negotiate direct input from all stakeholders, acknowledge marginalised groups through reflection, be able to use various cultural influencers, promote open and diverse opinion and debate and, finally, adapt practices to suit changing contexts. These imperatives, developed

by Macnamara and Crawford (2013), make a significant contribution to the theory of cultural intermediaries and can inform other culture-centred studies.

What is lacking, however, is the use of the circuit of culture as a theoretical framework in studying cultural intermediaries in developing contexts such as South Africa. The circuit of culture approach includes five different ‘moments’, each of which are dynamically articulated in order to create meaning. These moments include: representation, identity, production, consumption and regulation (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 98). Each of these moments are described as they apply to the Jozi Digital Ambassadors (JDAs) and their mentors, with specific attention given to how they represent meaning as a discursive moment, how they produce the various messages used in the project, and how they consume the various messages which are in themselves moments of circulation and production that in turn form new identities. Identity, here, is seen as a dynamic ongoing process of agreement and interpretation amongst producers and consumers. Finally, the role of regulation and attempts to control cultural activity, both informally and formally, and its impact on individuals, organisations and communities will be investigated.

#### **4. The Digital Ambassadors project**

South Africa, as a whole, and Johannesburg, in particular, consists of diverse contexts which require unique approaches to discourse and public relations. Diverse audiences require relevant messages from communication practitioners which demands a different way of thinking and talking about situations (Benecke & Oksiutycz, 2015). Differences can be addressed through a mind-set that sees the “other” as a co-creator of meaning, problem solving as a creative process, and diversity as beneficial (Bardhan, 2011, p. 93; Macnamara, 2015). An example of such an approach to public relations and the development of communication networks can be seen in the City of Johannesburg’s Digital Ambassadors project. This project aims to empower local residents to use the newly-established free WiFi networks installed throughout the city to access information, opportunities and services (City of Johannesburg, 2015).

The project aims to address some of the challenges facing citizens (especially young people) including access to information and unemployment. The Digital Ambassadors project is a multi-disciplinary collaboration between the University of Johannesburg (UJ) and the City of

Johannesburg (CoJ), and involves the recruitment, training, mentoring and remuneration of students deployed as mentors to the Jozi Digital Ambassadors (JDAs). As part of the roll out of an expected 1000 Wi-Fi hotspots throughout Johannesburg, the CoJ plans to ultimately capacitate approximately 3000 JDAs to train its residents to utilize and benefit from the broadband connections in their areas. Entrepreneurial youth are able to enrol as JDAs through institutional mechanisms. Selected candidates are appointed as JDAs who are trained in digital, business and life skills and are mentored by UJ students. The JDAs are further able to buy tablets for their own use and are provided with branded clothing and marketing material. The project aims to facilitate WiFi access for a targeted 720,000 residents of the CoJ, and will run over an 18-month period. Once trained, the JDAs are deployed in designated suburbs as identified in the CoJ's targeted spatial areas.

JDAs train residents to access online services including banking and digital map navigation as well as interact with the *Maru a Jozi* (cloud) portal to link up with a range of online services including work and job-search tools. Through the Digital Ambassadors programme, 'job seekers' are turned into 'job makers' who provide crucial services in the utilization of the high speed broadband of the city. In addition to increasing the digital footprint of the city, the programme further aims to create a platform for innovation, economic growth and community development (City of Johannesburg, 2015).

This project is an example of participatory and horizontal communication in that it seeks to ensure that all Johannesburg residents have equal access to communication resources and information (Hodges & McGrath, 2011, p.94). Participatory communication creates space to develop a social agenda from the bottom up, addressing local issues by 'imagining' alternatives in which the community takes the lead in identifying problems and generating local solutions (Hodges & McGrath, 2011; Overton-de Klerk & Oelofse, 2010). Cultural intermediaries enable relationships between various groups and communities as part of a process of relationship building and social transformation (Macnamara & Crawford, 2013).

Communication for social transformation requires a co-creative process, an absence of pre-determined agendas that primarily benefit sponsors and existing power structures, personal communication which is essential for decision making, and co-created strategies for changing behaviour (Hodges & McGrath, 2011). Adopting such an approach aims to incorporate interpersonal and relational practices by accommodating alternative views and practices of

participation and dialogue which are key constructs within multicultural communication (Banks, 1995; Macnamara, 2004). Networks and the exchange between individuals and groups strengthens their ability to express themselves which shapes social change (Hodges & McGrath, 2011, p.93).

## **5. Research methodology**

A qualitative research approach was used to explore the meaning that JDAs and their mentors, as cultural intermediaries, created around and about the Digital Ambassadors empowerment project. The circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) was used as a theoretical framework with its five 'moments' guiding the qualitative content analysis (Elo, Kääriäinen, Kantse, Pölkki, Utriainen, Kyngäs, 2014). Given the lack of knowledge about the role of public relations cultural intermediaries in developing contexts such as South Africa and the need to understand the meanings created by, specifically, unemployed youth (aged between 18 and 34) acting as JDAs, required an exploratory approach enabling the documentation of practices as they are lived, and not according to a prescribed set of rules (Dutta et al, 2012). In order to creating knowledge from below and become context-sensitive, it was necessary to actively involve the JDAs and their mentors in the research process; it was also necessary to include reflexivity on the part of the researcher/s. This allowed for theorising from below and ensured a culture-centred approach.

The Digital Ambassadors project is an ongoing project that presents an ideal opportunity for interdisciplinary research. This is because it aims to address social, infrastructural and economic issues in a collaborative manner. A diverse group of researchers have co-authored this paper, with each contributing their own disciplinary knowledge to the project as a whole. The researchers include educationalists, engineers, public relations and communication scholars, business management professionals, industrial psychologists and information management specialists. The JDAs, and their mentors, are also stakeholders in this complex network of relationships. The mentors are selected and trained by the University and are, in all instances, current students, some with limited tutoring and/or mentoring experience. The JDAs are recruited following a general information session at local community centres. Initial screening tests are undertaken as it is a requirement that they have a national senior (K12) certificate and be between 18 and 34 years old. These screening tests also include aptitude tests and, finally, a two-day training intervention.



Once the mentors and JDAs are trained and allocated their tablets, marketing material and marked clothing are provided. For the next 12 weeks, mentors and JDAs work closely together to achieve their individual targets and earn money: with every resident successfully trained and registered on the WiFi system, each JDA earns R50 (estimated \$3.50). To ensure that the JDAs are paid accurately, a sophisticated online portal verifies the geolocation and duration of the training conducted by the JDA with each resident. In addition to the mentor, the support offered to the JDAs includes the following.

- Blended learning videos that cover customer care and personal development topics, with a specific theme focused upon each week, available on the website.
- Digital platforms such as Facebook, blogs and the project website are all linked to within the *Maru A Jozi* site to assist with raising awareness of the project.
- Group coaching sessions are undertaken so as to assist JDAs in addressing any issues they may face.

For the purpose of this paper, which deals with the pilot phase of the larger project, six mentors and 29 JDAs were involved, all of whom were unemployed youth who were prepared for and deployed in specific areas within Johannesburg. Data collection methods used included face-to-face interviews, video recorded workshops and interviews, observations by researchers, reflective reports compiled by mentors and project documentation (Cho & Lee, 2014). The video-recorded interviews and face-to-face interviews were transcribed and analysed for themes and the themes were grouped into categories.

Data analysis included both deductive and inductive content analysis processes (Elo et al, 2014) with the inductive approach used to identify themes and categories from the interviews and observations. The deductive approach involved applying the five ‘moments’ of the circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) as an exemplification of meaning creation categories. The units of analysis included transcriptions of the video-recorded and face-to-face interviews and observational reports. The combination of inductive and deductive methods was undertaken in order to determine the validity of the circuit of culture as a means to determine the development of meaning within a culture-centred approach.

Finally, it is important in qualitative studies to ensure the trustworthiness of data collected (Elo et al, 2014, p. 2). Trustworthiness is achieved by applying rigour when collecting and analysing data, and when presenting the results, and ensuring that every stage is thoroughly described, that respondents are authentic and that content is analysed by describing the richness of the data gathered (Elo et al, 2014, p. 8).

## **6. Findings**

This investigation into the Digital Ambassadors project focuses specifically on the JDAs, and their mentors, as cultural intermediaries within the project. In line with a culture-centred approach, which is context-sensitive, and the need to develop theory from the ground up, it was important to incorporate a variety of data collection methods. Discussion of the findings herein initially focuses on the meaning ascribed to the project by the six mentors (students at the University of Johannesburg) regarding their experiences and contribution to the piloting of the project with 29 JDAs (all aged between 18 and 34). Thereafter, discussion of how the JDAs themselves derived meaning from their role as cultural intermediaries within the project during their own recruitment and training as digital ambassadors is provided.

The qualitative content analysis approach used to interpret the data allows for the generation of both inductive and deductive findings. The inductive findings are discussed first. Inductive findings, for both the mentors and the JDAs, are drawn from the video-recorded interviews, in-depth mentor interviews, and evaluation reports. Findings pertaining to the mentors and JDAs are reported on separately due to their unique roles within the project.

### **6.1 Inductive findings: Mentors**

The themes most commonly found amongst the mentors interviewed ranged from their own development and opportunities, to suggestions as to how the training of future mentors and JDAs could be improved based on the challenges they experienced.

Their involvement as mentors came about as a result of somebody introducing them to the opportunity. As such, recruitment of mentors tended to take place through ‘word of mouth’ and personal referral rather than a formal, advertised recruitment process. The mentors’ motivation for participating in the programme included the view that it was an opportunity to

assist in the upliftment of their communities. This was evident in comments such as: *“It sounded exciting and I’ve been involved with similar projects in the past”* and *“It’s the involvement with people from different backgrounds which makes us who we are”*.

Developing new skills and building on existing skills were also mentioned as factors that motivated their involvement in the pilot project. All the mentors stated that leadership and communication skills were the most valuable skills they acquired during their involvement in the Digital Ambassadors project. Their own confidence developed through being involved with the project as they had to communicate with the JDAs and residents and, ultimately, successfully complete the project. They highlighted specific leadership skills such as the ability to motivate JDAs during difficult times, for example when the WiFi was down and the JDAs could thus not train the residents which influenced their income and success rate. The mentors also had to deal with conflict, focus the efforts of the JDAs, and follow up with individuals who did not perform according to the set target of training 240 residents over a three (3) month period. The importance of respect, language and sensitivity were also raised by the mentors.

These leadership principles were achieved through regular contact via a ‘Whatsapp’ chat group, by addressing individuals with respect (especially those older than the mentor), listening to their suggestions during meetings and speaking their home language. Mentors also rewarded JDAs for their achievements by sending them encouraging messages and sharing success stories. Patience, professional conduct and accessibility, as well as dealing with issues promptly, were cited as important practices to ensure that the JDAs remained motivated and that the pilot project was a success. Several mentors used the metaphor of a coach to describe their role in the Digital Ambassadors project with reference made to setting goals, ensuring effective training and continuous involvement. Their own training, at the launch of the project, was found to be essential and a major contributor to their personal success and skills development.

The challenges they experienced were mostly technical in nature. The unavailability of WiFi hotspots was often mentioned as a problem due to the effect it had on both the motivation of the JDAs and the successful roll out of the resident-training aspect of the project. Reporting structures for addressing these connectivity problems were seemingly complex with many different role players involved. This resulted in an issue being escalated but only being fixed

after, in some cases, a number of days. This tested the mentors' skills regarding conflict management, working through disappointment, resilience and adapting targets.

Another commonly cited challenge was the demand placed on the mentors to be available at all times irrespective of their own commitments as students. One mentor described this challenge as 'expensive'. When asked to explain, he stated the following: "*There are sacrifices that you have to make; you have to give much of your time and attention. It's (a) personal investment that's why I call it expensive*".

## **6.2 Inductive findings: JDAs**

The themes most often mentioned by the JDAs included their self-development through improved interpersonal and communication skills. The majority commented on how they challenged themselves to engage with strangers, approach an uncertain situation with courage and act with resilience and perseverance, even as some residents treated them with suspicion while others refused to give the ten minutes required to undergo the training.

The JDAs also commented on the financial rewards of the project which not only enabled them to support their families, but also gave them a sense of self-worth and, furthermore, gave them the opportunity to invest some of their earnings into their personal businesses. As stated by one of the most successful JDAs: "*12 weeks to use money wisely – no fancy stuff – make money with more money*". Some of the JDAs ensured that their studies were paid, some bought additional equipment for their micro-enterprises, while others spent the money on basics such as school uniforms for their children or food for their family. Many of the JDAs, it emerged, were the only source of income for their families.

The training of the JDAs, and in turn their training of the residents regarding use of the free WiFi, came through as another major theme. The JDAs mentioned how important their own training was in ensuring that they knew how to use the tablets they were issued as well as in equipping them to train residents. Comments made included the following: "*I had very limited knowledge of WiFi before the training but afterwards I was able to open my own email account and train others how to do it and use other services offered by Maru A Jozi*".

Another theme pertained to the development of entrepreneurial skill. It was made evident that the training should give greater attention to the development of such a skill as this would be of significant benefit to the JDAs, many of whom indicated that they plan to establish (or have already established) their own small businesses, ranging from a hair and beauty salon to an events company, a welding company and a cell phone repair shop. The need for greater focus on entrepreneurship has already been somewhat addressed within the project: a wide variety of educational videos were produced and made available to the JDAs online. These videos aim to develop the business and entrepreneurial profile of the JDAs. The online reporting system also aids in the development of business literacy as they are required to undertake basic accounting processes in recording their own work and invoicing for payment.

An important challenge highlighted by the JDAs was the issue of connectivity and the impact this had on their success. Many found creative ways to deal with this problem: some bought data to enable their training or used other WiFi networks rather than the dedicated, free WiFi offered by the City. Their association with the City of Johannesburg offered them the credibility necessary to be successful in their work as JDAs. This reinforced the need for JDA-branded material such as clothing, business cards and a 'pop-up' stall.

### **6.3 Deductive findings**

The circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) includes five 'moments': representation, production, consumption, identity and regulation. These moments were used to describe the meanings that the JDAs and their mentors ascribed to their involvement in the Digital Ambassadors project. Discussion of the various moments is presented herein so as to develop an understanding of each and explore the suitability of the circuit of culture in theorising about the creation of meaning amongst cultural intermediaries (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 98).

#### **6.3.1 Representation**

Representation involves characterising the ways in which the JDAs and their mentors conceive of their position in the Digital Ambassadors project; this is made evident through their motivations for taking part in the project. These motivations ranged from being inquisitive to viewing it as an opportunity offered to unemployed youth. During the training,

the programme facilitators shared their ideas around the preferred practice of both the JDAs and the mentors. However, in the field, representation of the practice was context-bound and highly dependent on, in particular, the hotspots and the residents. The JDAs had to develop problem solving skills so as to ensure that residents understood the purpose of their engagement. Both JDAs and mentors mentioned how they had to adapt their approaches due to differences in response from individuals. It was found that many of the more successful JDAs (and mentors) were able to use their positions of power positively and convince others to listen to them. Reflection on the part of the training facilitator revealed that those JDAs who adopted an overly assertive approach were less successful, which aligned with the shadow matching criteria used to recruit and screen the JDAs.

### **6.3.2 Production**

Production involves the logistical and ideological motivation for the project. Standardised practices, including reporting structures, technological verification of successful training sessions, provision of marketing material and procedures for dealing with lost or broken tablets were components included within the training provided to both JDAs and mentors. The recruitment, training and management of the project are the responsibility of various consultants to the CoJ. For example, Harambee, a youth empowerment entity, is responsible for the recruitment and selection of JDAs, whilst the training function is contracted to the University of Johannesburg (UJ). The organisational cultures of the various stakeholders associated with the project played a role in the structure of the training which in turn influenced the production of information used by the JDAs during their training of the residents and by the mentors in supporting the JDAs. Extensive reports were available regarding the training programme offered to mentors and JDAs, the implementation and roll out of the various hotspots, and the progress made by the JDAs. In addition, extensive reflective reports were produced by the mentors regarding their individual JDAs.

### **6.3.3 Consumption**

Consumption is closely related to production: discursive meaning is realised in the way that information – in this instance, the training of mentors, JDAs and residents – is consumed (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 101). Training, and the use of the free WiFi services offered by the CoJ, only became meaningful once consumed by stakeholders. Comments made by

mentors and JDAs as to the value and opportunities associated with knowing how to use digital devices, being connected and knowing about the various services offered on the *Maru A Jozi* portal opened up new avenues to access information regarding, for example, public transport, emergency services or employment opportunities, that is, it opened up new avenues for consumption.

#### **6.3.4 Identity**

Identity is dynamic, and influenced by class, ethnicity, nationality and gender (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 101). Findings regarding identity focus on individuals rather than organisations or nationalities. The identity of the mentors was clearly influenced by the fact of them being students, their association with the formal UJ structure and their (paid) appointment as mentors. The mentors interviewed were all male, confident in their technical abilities and eager to develop their communication and interpersonal skills all of which resulted in them performing well during the pilot programme.

The JDAs were diverse in terms of their levels of education: although the minimum requirement was a senior high school certificate, many were either studying or had completed tertiary studies (the cohort included a qualified social worker who was unemployed). Most of the JDAs identified themselves in terms of their economic status: some stated the challenges of being unemployed with no or very limited sources of income and the sense of pride the project offered them. Their identities as JDAs were a result of being part of the Digital Ambassadors project which afforded them opportunities to benefit financially, support their families and experience the success of reaching their targets.

#### **6.3.5 Regulation**

Regulation includes formal and informal controls associated with cultural activities (Curtin & Gaither, 2005, p. 103). It is important to note that regulation does not promote the status quo but rather acts as a moment in which dissent may result in adaptive practices. This was evident in the 'creative' problem solving approach followed by some JDAs when faced with the problem of unavailability of the CoJ free WiFi. They improvised by buying data or using other WiFi services which was seen to contravene the mandate from the CoJ, who sought to promote the use of their WiFi service. Regulation was evident as, subsequently, the CoJ

stipulated that payment would only be made for successful training of residents using the CoJ WiFi network. This is an example of the influence that formal organisational regulation may have on individuals and alerts one to the role of power in relational practices. The issue of power was also highlighted by the JDAs who commented that being part of the CoJ structure provided them with the power necessary to confidently engage in their work. The same was said of the marketing material provided to them.

It is important to note that the circuit of culture literature indicates that interaction between the various moments, referred to as articulation, is an important unit of analysis. Articulation within the Digital Ambassadors project occurred between the project facilitators, mentors, JDAs, residents, community structures and businesses around the various hotspots, UJ and the CoJ. Interactions and discursive events at different times influenced both the individual circuit of culture moments and the meaning attached to the Digital Ambassadors project by the mentors and JDAs.

## **7. Discussion and future research**

The aim of this research paper has been to explore the meanings that young cultural intermediaries ascribe to their experiences of a digital empowerment project. The argument has been made that cultural intermediaries include any persons who produce and consume information: this cannot be the sole privilege of public relations and communication practitioners. In the context of a developing democracy such as South Africa, social development is complex and requires multi-disciplinary engagement. In order to understand the meanings co-created by JDAs and their mentors, here we focus on aspects relating to profiles and personal development, training and the structure of the project and, finally, the practices of the mentors and JDAs as cultural intermediaries.

In order to understand the profile and personal development aspects of the JDAs and their mentors, it is necessary to first consider their motivations. The mentors were authentic in their motivations for joining the project as they understood the skills they lacked and regarded the project as a means to an end, irrespective of it being a pilot project and that they were not completely sure as to what to expect. The project and associated training not only developed their leadership and communication skills but also provided them with the confidence needed to represent the project and its complexities to a diverse group of JDAs



and residents. The success of this group of mentors can be ascribed to their technical skills, sensitivity and the respect with which they interacted with the JDAs. The JDAs, for their part, were able to benefit financially, develop their technical and interpersonal skills, gain access to video learning material, and gain support from mentors, project coordinators and trainers, all the while providing the necessary training to empower Johannesburg residents with respect to digital access. The meaning created by these cultural intermediaries on a personal level pertained primarily to skills development, self-worth and a sense of diversity in society. Their motivation may have been selfish at the beginning but many later commented on the importance of understanding others, developing relationships which lasted beyond the training, empowering others, and acting as representatives of a larger structure. These aspects relate well to the findings of MacNamara and Crawford (2013) in that both the mentors and the JDAs were familiar with the cultural contexts in which they worked, understood the relevant social history and could relate to the residents they trained. Further research could focus, in a more explicit manner, on the identity of young unemployed people acting as cultural intermediaries.

The second aspect of shared meaning within the project relates to the training and support offered to the mentors and JDAs by the various consultants appointed to the project. Both the mentors and JDAs found this training to be important and, although they were not part of the original project planning, they understood the general objectives of the project and were determined to use their training to be successful. The representation, production, consumption and regulation moments within the circuit of culture were all found to be relevant to this aspect of the project. The various articulations between these moments were also evident in the problems highlighted by the stakeholders. It was mentioned that some of the problems had to be addressed through means outside of those prescribed in the training which caused some tension and conflict. Those who were most successful within the project were not only sensitive to the context and individuals involved, but were able to 'play within the rules' and addressed problems effectively. The structured nature of the project was also an important aspect, as this provided the JDAs and mentors with the necessary confidence and authority when problems arose and the power they needed to influence residents. An important aspect that requires further research is the fact that an intervention such as this must do more to develop the entrepreneurial profile of unemployed youth. This will further facilitate the achievement of CoJs' political agenda of developing micro-enterprises and creating job opportunities.

A final aspect of the meaning that arose from this pilot project resides in the success of the JDAs (and mentors) with respect to successfully training and registering residents on the newly rolled-out, free WiFi network. Their practices were primarily guided by the predetermined standards of practice developed for the project (in line with contractual obligations) and according to which the training and support were undertaken. As cultural intermediaries, they were faced with various challenges such as ineffective WiFi at their designated hotspot resulting in them having to adapt their practice so as to reach their targets and receive their expected payment. Not all the methods employed by the JDAs were deemed acceptable by the project coordinators who had to actively counteract these measures. The reporting structure also presented problems which may have impacted on the success of some JDAs who lost the motivation to continue with the project. Further research could examine the problem solving strategies of cultural intermediaries in developing contexts, with specific emphasis on their resilience, communication and public relations practices.

## **8. Conclusion**

The aim of this paper was to investigate the meanings created by cultural intermediaries involved in the Digital Ambassadors project in Johannesburg, South Africa. A culture-centred approach was followed in order to identify meanings, as created from the bottom-up, and to contribute to the development of theory with respect to cultural intermediaries in developing, diverse and complex situations. The circuit of culture (Curtin & Gaither, 2005) and qualitative content analysis provided valuable research methods that assisted in the identification of moments and themes related to the meanings created by the digital ambassadors and their mentors during their participation in the WiFi rollout project.

The meaning co-created by the mentors and the JDAs indicated the importance of the context, training and structure associated with the project and the significant influence it had on the quality of the experience and the level of influence cultural intermediaries have in the various areas they operated in. This supports findings from the Macnamara and Crawford (2013) study, namely, the value of cultural intermediaries can be found in their understanding of the historical context, their ability to relate to the individuals involved, performing best within a given structure in order to act with legitimacy. These young, diverse and unemployed cultural intermediaries successfully acted as representatives of CoJ and ensured

that thousands of residents now have the knowledge and awareness of the free WiFi system offered to them, thus creating meaning through their identity and representation of the service.

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