

Introduction

- Digital platforms are now a key part of young people's lives and offer both opportunities and challenges for health research
- We used WhatsApp to explore young people’s perspectives on health topics through participatory photography as part of the MTV Shuga Peer Education evaluation in South Africa

Methods

We invited young people enrolled in the MTV Shuga Down South Peer Education Programme in South Africa to partake in a 6-week WhatsApp-based participatory photography project.

Participants were prompted by text messages on WhatsApp to share photos and captions based on SRH topics covered by the MTV Shuga Peer Education Programme in Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town .

- Weekly prompts :
1. Accessing sexual health services: Where do you go, and what’s it like?
 2. Stigma: What stigmatises us, and how do we push back?
 3. Bullying and harassment: How do we deal with it?
 4. Healthy romantic relationships: What does it look like?
 5. Wellbeing: What helps you lead a happy life?
 6. Peer education programme: What has your experience been like

Analysis: We conducted a thematic analysis of captions written by young people, using their words to guide our interpretation of the images and ensure their perspectives shaped the overall narrative.

Hi, this is the MTV Shuga Evaluation team!

If you want to join our Photo project, save our number now because we want to send you messages and data 😊

Each week for 6 weeks, we will send you a message with a topic. It'll be easy and fun to respond with no wrong answers!

We'll give you more information and data if you add our number by Monday.

16:08 ✓✓

Invitation text message inviting them to join the participatory photography project in Pietermaritzburg



What stigmatises me is when people make assumptions about me. It makes me feel lonely. I like to go for walks which makes me feel better when people are mean.

11:47 ✓✓

Example photos used to explain the activity to participants



I went to get tested at the clinic once for HIV but it was embarrassing and I felt judged. I want a self test kit but don't know where to get them.

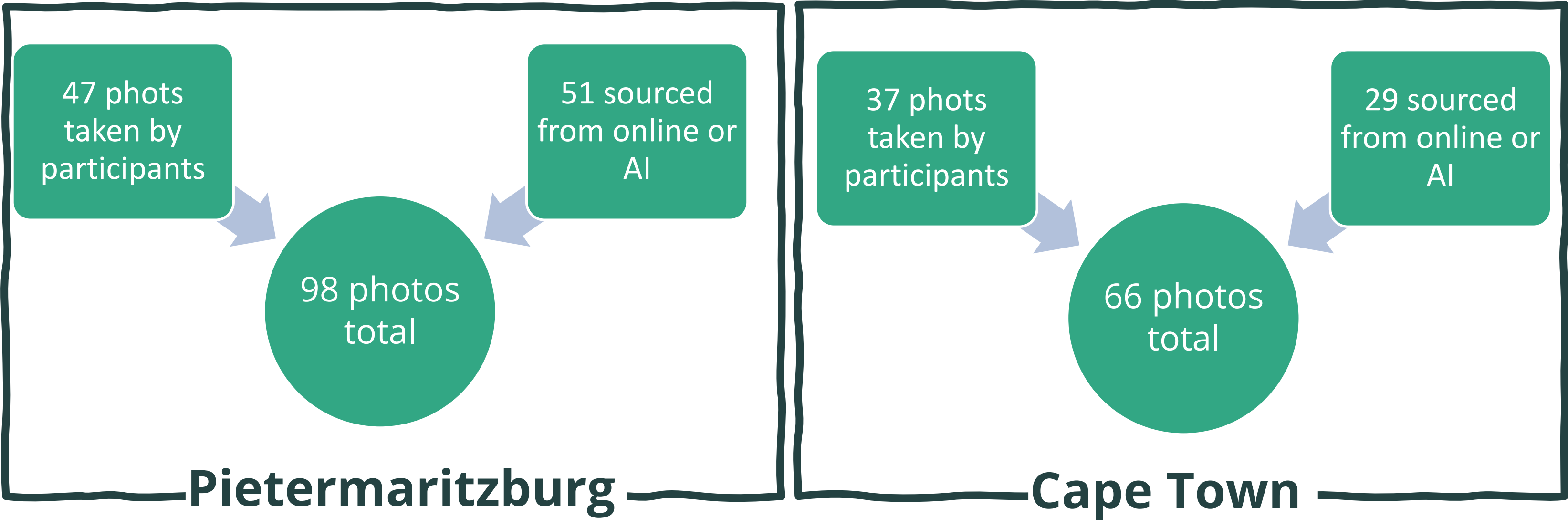
14:15 ✓✓

Exploring the Feasibility of Photovoice through WhatsApp in Evaluating the MTV Shuga Peer Education Program

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Results



Participants’ WhatsApp captions accompanying their photo submission

Being part of the Shuga program has truly been a life changing experience as it has awakened the desire to start living life with a purpose, for myself and those I love 💕

Health and wellness....I know how to treat myself in a positive way....and my self-esteem is very high. Now I can communicate better with people around me

Being part of this program means alot to me i mean unity, friendships to share without being judged & it did boost my self- confidence. I'm so grateful.

I have gained a deeper understanding of HIV/AIDS, sexual health, and relationships. learned about prevention methods, testing and treatment options. Developed more empathetic and non judgemental attitudes towards people living with HIV/AIDS. I felt inspired by the character's resilience and determination. Started discussing HIV/AIDS and sexual health with friends and family, I became more diligent about practising safer sex.

Lessons Learned

1. Trust and Engagement: Digital platforms can potentially reach many participants quickly at a low cost, but, in this activity, personal engagement with researchers enhanced meaningful participation. This may be particularly relevant for topics related to sexual health and relationships. Meeting participants in person in CT resulted in better engagement (75% of those invited) and higher quality responses, compared to PMB's digital-only approach (21% of those invited).
2. Barriers to Participation: Despite clear text instructions, many participants in PMB misunderstood the project's purpose, which may have contributed to low engagement, as digital interactions didn't provide the same opportunity for questions and explanations as in-person communication.
3. Access to Technology: Some participants used shared phones with inconsistent access. While WhatsApp is widely used, intermittent access to phones and data created challenges for sustained participation.
4. AI Usage: Some participants used AI-generated images, raising questions about the authenticity of digital data As AI improves, we might not know if responses are generated by participants or AI tools.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated that WhatsApp can be a tool for engaging young people virtually in participatory photography, especially when combined with in-person opportunities for researchers to build trust, understanding, and relationships.

Key challenges to this approach include young people's inconsistent access to technology and their growing use of AI to generate images and content.

Recruitment:
Two Different Approaches

All 15-25-year-olds who attended the MTV Shuga Peer Education programme in Pietermaritzburg and Cape Town(in Q4 2024 were invited to complete an online survey evaluating the programme. At the end of the survey, participants could opt in to be contacted for a WhatsApp-based participatory photography project.

In Pietermaritzburg, all eligible participants received invitation text messages, translated voicenotes instructions, and example photos with captions through WhatsApp.

In Cape Town, a smaller group was invited in person. They received a printed flyer with weekly prompts, sample photos and instructions, and had the opportunity to ask questions.

Pietermaritzburg	Cape Town
310 Eligible	160 Eligible
155 consented to be contacted	67 consented to be contacted
155 invited text messages to participate	20 invited in-person to participate
34 participants over 6 weeks	15 participated over 6 weeks
7 participants sent at least 5 pictures over the 6 weeks	10 participants sent at least 5 pictures over the 6 weeks