

'She's a slut ... and it's wrong': Youth constructions of taxi queens in the Western Cape

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Abstract

Recent research on young women's sexuality highlights the transactional nature of relationships among young people, as well as the increase in intergenerational sexual relationships. These unequal and often coercive sexual practices may increase young women's vulnerability to unsafe sexual practices. Within this context, while there have been some media reports on the relationship between girls and taxi drivers, there has been little documented research on the phenomenon of 'taxi queens'. Therefore, this study aimed to explore the understandings and constructions of taxi queens among local youth. A qualitative study involving 13 focus groups were held with youth in the Cape Town Metropole and the southern Cape region and analysed thematically. In general, there was widespread recognition among participants of transactional relationships between young women and usually older drivers. Taxi queens were strongly stigmatised, but their behaviour was also constructed as normative, especially in poor communities, and reflecting contradictory notions of vulnerability and power. However, taxi drivers were less stigmatised. Such constructions allow for the 'othering' of these young women, which may undermine their ability to seek help in negotiating safer sexual relationships. At the same time, their concerns need to be understood within the larger context of challenges facing youth, especially in poor South African communities.

A focus on young women's sexuality in South Africa has proliferated over the last 15–20 years, reflected by academic research as well as organisational attempts to address girls' and young women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS, early and unwanted pregnancies, and coercive and violent sexual relations with boys and men (see, e.g., Harrison, 2010; Shefer, 2009). Much of this literature has illustrated the challenges for young women, particularly regarding sexual relationships. Researchers highlight how normative gender roles in which women are expected to be passive and submissive sexually, and a lack of a positive language on women's sexual desires, undermine women's capacity to assert their sexuality and negotiate safe sexual practices (Kahn, 2008; Lesch & Kruger, 2004; Shefer & Foster, 2009; Varga, 1997). Moreover, double standards in which men are rewarded for sexual prowess and promiscuity, while women are punished for being knowledgeable or assertive about sexuality further undermine equitable negotiation in sexual relations (Reddy & Dunne, 2007; Shefer & Foster, 2009).

An emerging component of this work has recognised the centrality of transactional relationships in risky sexual practices among young people. Thus, transactional sex in which young women may exchange sex for money, goods, or other benefits, including alcohol and drugs, has been shown to play an important role in unsafe and coercive sexual behaviour and is receiving growing attention in southern Africa (Clowes, Shefer, Fouten, Vergnani, & Jacobs, 2009; Dunkle et al., 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003).

However, increasingly, authors are arguing that it is problematic to assume a one-dimensional picture of transactional sex in which women are inevitably helpless victims (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Hunter, 2010). Rather it has been argued that such transactions are complex, have long been a part of the relationships between men and women across history and societies, and are not necessarily or always representative of women's disempowerment and male abuse of power. Thus, Oxlund (2009) suggests the 'concept of reciprocity of love [that] points to broader definitions of exchange' that are not inherently exploitative (p. 206). Similarly, Bhana and Pattman (2011) argue that love, sex, and gender are interwoven for young people especially in poor communities and that these social meanings and practices need to be taken seriously in endeavours to impact on unsafe and inequitable sexual practices.

Notwithstanding the importance of providing a more nuanced approach to transactional sex among young people, it is also evident that the intersection of power inequalities across the indices of class, gender, and age may facilitate inequalities and a potential vulnerability of young women to abuse and violence in such relationships. Within this context then, an additional concern has been the growing emergence of intergenerational sexual relationships. Thus, it is argued that intergenerational sex between young and usually poor women with older better resourced men (popularly known as 'sugar daddies') poses a significant risk for young women with respect to their vulnerability to HIV infection (Luke, 2005; Shisana et al., 2009).

While there is little documented work on so-called 'taxi queens', young women who are thought to exchange sex for material benefits from taxi drivers in the public transport industry, what literature does exist highlights the pervasive stigmatisation of the taxi queen, whereas the taxi driver appears to suffer little social stigma (Potgieter, Strelbel, & Wagner, 2009; Van Wieling, 2004). However, owing to the absence of research into taxi queens, there is limited information about the nature and dynamics of these relationships. In order then to gain a better understanding of how the problem is perceived in local communities, the aim of this study was to explore understandings and constructions regarding taxi queens among young people in the Western Cape. This article unpacks this relationship, with particular focus on how it is understood by young people in the communities where the taxi queen– taxi driver relationship is common. A focus on constructed investments and motivations and the nature and dynamics of such relationships is presented, as articulated by the participants.

Methodology

Given the formative and exploratory nature of the study, part of a larger study on taxi queens, a qualitative methodology informed by a feminist social constructionist theoretical approach was used. The method of data collection was focus-group interviews

with youth, between the ages of 15 and 18 years, in two geographic areas, the Cape Town Metropole and George and Knysna in the southern Cape.¹ A preliminary interview guide for the focus-group discussions was developed, based on media reports on taxi queens, as well as informal discussions with some key informants. Questions covered in the group discussions included, among others, whether participants had heard about so-called taxi queens, what they saw as the nature of their relationships with taxi drivers, what the reasons might be for such relationships, and how taxi queens were perceived in their community. Selection of members for the groups used largely snowball sampling, that is, once a research participant was identified, he or she would refer other local youth willing to participate in the group discussions to the researchers (Bryman, 2012). A total of 13 focus groups were conducted with young people who live in disadvantaged communities where the use of public transport by young people is high, and the phenomenon of taxi queens is popularly believed to be common: seven in Cape Town, four with African youth and three with coloured youth;² and six in the southern Cape region, three with African and three with coloured youth. Groups were either single sex or included both females and males.

Standard ethical procedures for research with human participants were adhered to, and ethical clearance was obtained from one of the national scientific council ethics committees. Participants were given information sheets about the project, signed consent forms, and gave permission for the groups to be audio recorded. Participation in the groups was voluntary. While confidentiality and anonymity cannot be guaranteed for group discussions, participants were urged to keep the contents of the discussions confidential.

The groups took place in a venue convenient to the participants and were conducted in the language of choice of the participants (either Xhosa, English, or Afrikaans, as the three official languages of the Western Cape province) by senior research team members, who matched the demographics of the participants as far as possible: for example, both a male and a female facilitator, speaking both English and Afrikaans, conducted mixed groups of coloured youth in Cape Town. Participants received a small remuneration at the conclusion of the group. The audio-recorded focus group sessions were transcribed verbatim and translated into English where necessary. Thematic analysis was then conducted on the transcribed texts, using Atlas.ti (version 5.0) for coding and management of the data. The particular method of analysis used involved identifying patterns or themes across the dataset, ‘within a social constructionist epistemology (i.e., where patterns are identified as socially produced, but no discursive analysis is conducted)’ (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81). Braun and Clarke’s six steps of analysis were followed to produce themes that related to the research question.

The quality of the analysis was ensured by transcribing the data verbatim, checking the transcripts against the tapes for exactness, and coding all the data thoroughly. This involved giving equal attention to all the transcripts, checking the themes for internal coherence, consistency, and distinctiveness, and also the themes with each other and the dataset, telling a convincing and organised story about the data, and matching extracts and analytic claims (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Findings

In analysing the texts from the focus-group discussions with both coloured and African informants, as well as those from the Cape Town Metropole compared to the more rural southern Cape region, it was striking that the dominant constructions of taxi queens were, for the most part, similar across these demographic groups. There were also no notable differences between single sex and mixed groups. They are thus reported together, although the quotations illustrating themes will identify the source of the comment. The key themes elaborated on in this article relate to constructions of the taxi queen and the taxi driver, as well as the complex range of perceived motivations for becoming a taxi queen, and how these depictions may contribute to stigmatisation of their behaviour.

Constructions of taxi queens and taxi drivers

There was widespread recognition among participants of the phenomenon of girls, from as young as 12 years of age, travelling with taxi drivers, in a relationship that was foregrounded as one based on material exchange, in which the girls would receive gifts from the taxi driver, including cell phones, cash, cigarettes, alcohol, and methamphetamine (*tik*):

F:3 I would say it is, say for example, a girl goes to school via a taxi, a girl goes to school via a taxi, she uses public transport. She finds that she gets certain attention from the driver, and she starts flirting and it builds up from there (SC)

All: Yes/alcohol/clothes/cars/free rides/phones (CT)

Others thought that the girls received not only essentials but also luxury things, like jewellery, money for the hairdresser, some saying ‘*they spoil you rotten*’:

F2: Money, money, money, bling, bling, bling. It’s all about that. F3: Whether he can give you whatever you need.

F1: And whatever you want (CT)

F: With some . . . she’s doing it for matric dance. She’s still at school and everyone is choosing what they’ll be wearing, like ‘ooh I’ll wear this or I’ll wear that’, and you know that you don’t have any of that but in your mind you know that you’re going. It’s still early and she knows that it [the formal] should be around September, so she’ll try to find someone in the meantime who’ll be able to have done everything for her come September . . . buy her clothes (CT)

This was seen by participants as a purely transactional relationship, in which the girls received such gifts in exchange for sex with the taxi driver:

F: We get to [name of place] and alcohol will be bought for me⁴ by this sugar daddy, but they won’t just buy alcohol for me, we’ll have to go to his place and sleep together. In that way he’s making you pay him back for what he’s done for you. So that’s what they do, they won’t just give you their money and not expect anything in return (CT)

There was a strong sense that the girls tended to go for older men, as they were more likely to have money than younger ones:

F: The thing is most of the guys who are taxi drivers are old. So that's why they are dating them, just for they know that they have money. They [taxi drivers] can, they can afford them. So that's what they are doing. (SC)
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Notable in participant constructions was the extensive stigmatising of the behaviour of taxi queens. Thus, the terms used to describe the young women who have relationships with taxi drivers were largely derogatory, and they were strongly condemned in local communities:

F5: Hoere, hoere. [Whores] F1: It's like you, you're dirty
F3: There's a vulgar word for it, jintoe [laughter] (CT)

F2: And even parents in the community won't want me to befriend their children because there is the perception that I will negatively influence them. That I'm wrong and naughty . . .

F3: And then people call you names, in that community, just because you're dating a taxi man. So that's the thing . . .

M2: Yes, you're isolated (CT)

In addition, these young women were seen as promiscuous in that they moved from one taxi driver to another, often sleeping with a number of drivers at the same time. Participants further perceived the relationship as having no future, not being 'normal', and only about sex and drugs. They described how the driver would eventually get tired of her and leave her:

F: And it's degrading. Like for us it would be degrading, degrading, degrading (CT)

F: It's impossible to have a 'normal relationship' with taxi drivers, it's always about sex and drugs, they only buy you a drink to overpower her to have sex with her (CT)

F: But at the end it's very bad because the taxi driver is, is, is, has had enough of you. So now he's starting to see new ones, you know. So you're becoming the old grooves, and they're becoming the new one. (SC)

They also thought that families were disapproving of their daughters being taxi queens and worried about them being taken advantage of:

F2: If it's your daughter, as a mother, for your daughter to be involved in that, it's . . . it would be devastating (CT)

According to participants, however, while most girls came to see the disadvantages of being taxi queens, others enjoyed their position and did not care what people thought about them:

F: These girls don't see it as a problem. They don't care what people think, they just do what makes them happy . . . These girls like to be called taxi queens, it's a bad label but they like it (CT)

F: And they don't really care, if, that person, taxi driver have a wife . . . She's not worried. As long as she has the guy in her life (CT)

F: They're in denial. They really are, because to them, they're not a taxi queen. That's his girlfriend (CT)

In comparison to the largely stigmatising constructions of taxi queens, participants expressed opinions about taxi drivers that reflected both critical and more sympathetic positions. On the one hand, they were depicted as having lots of girls at the same time, wanting to be seen with attractive young girls, although they usually had a wife and children at home:

F: They always say they [taxi drivers] want to be players. They want to be all over . . . They are playing us all. You know, they want to be recognised that 'I've been through that girl, and I've been through that girl'. (SC)

M: There's not one good man who is a taxi driver/yes

F: Die taxi driver is almal se man [The taxi driver is everybody's man], they never have just one girl, when you get out, another one climbs in/like a one-night stand. (CT)

Taxi drivers were also seen as being dangerous and potentially violent, and so feared in communities, with parents perhaps not wanting to intervene due to a perception of drivers as being a law unto themselves:

F5: And the first thing that comes to, that comes to your mother's mind is 'he's dangerous'. F2: He's going to take advantage of her (CT)

F: Everyone knows they are skollies, and they carry guns, so what can your mother do about it? (CT)

On the other hand, the drivers were depicted as being decent men, earning an honest living:

F4: And it's not all taxi drivers also. It's not all taxi drivers that are like that. F5: Ja, there is some that's actually decent (CT)

Some participants also recognised the difference in stigma associated with the behaviour of the drivers compared to that of the girls:

F: If the guy is having sex with every girl, nothing. If the girl has sex with two guys, everything (CT)

M: Taxi drivers don't get names, it makes them feel good to have school girls, they're important (CT)

Perceived motivations for becoming a taxi queen

Participants spoke of a number of different motivations for the behaviour of taxi queens. They suggested that these girls thought that it was 'cool' to be a taxi queen, that they achieved status and recognition from being seen sitting up front with taxi drivers and acquiring possessions:

*F: When I have a friend, that's dating a taxi driver, I will, I think it's all about the position that, that, that particular person is in. You know. Because I see a taxi driver driving this gorgeous car, [unclear], and this guy's also got the gifts. So, it's all about the perception of that, that the [unclear] of the guy, and the taxi that he's driving. So I think it's all about the possessions sometimes (SC)
of the guy, and the taxi that he's driving. So I think it's all about the possessions sometimes (SC)*

Many thought that it was poverty that drove girls to this behaviour, so that they were able to get the things that their parents could not provide or were even encouraged by parents to get such assistance:

*F: Some of them are suffering. They have, they don't have parents to support them [unclear]
. . . Then they decide to become taxi queens (SC)*

F: There is nothing in the house, no food to eat, so you'll go to your mother and say 'Mama, there's someone like this, this person is telling me this because he's got money'. So mom will say, 'Take him my child, because as you can see, the situation at home is difficult'. That is the influence of parents who do that (CT)

However, an alternative discourse was that they could be any girls, even those from 'good families', and that it was peer pressure that drove them:

F: Most of the people with money . . . like we go around in groups, like one, two, three, four, five, we're all friends. I'm a friend of theirs, but I'm different from them, they're higher than me, they wear expensive things and then I decide, ok fine, my mother doesn't have any money, she tries to provide for me and everything but she doesn't bother with the luxuries. That's why girls go to guys that have money because she wants to maintain the standard set by her friends by having the same things as them (CT)

Another perception was that girls got involved with taxi drivers in order to support a drug habit or that the drivers would get the girls addicted in order to maintain their dependence on him:

F: It gets finished, and then the next day you want the tik again and then you ask the taximan to help you out again because you want a hit (CT)

A further construction highlighted emotional factors as accounting for this behaviour: Girls who experienced family problems, neglect, or stress got the affirmation, acknowledgement, and affection that was absent at home from taxi drivers, or the relationship might be seen as a form of rebellion against parents:

F: And there's, sometimes, you're missing something in your life as well, then you can get . . . a certain affection from this guy . . . And maybe he will provide that affection that you always wanted (CT)

F5: Ja, the situation where, poor people, you live in poverty. Your parents are divorced

F4: And you need to feel loved.

F1: She's looking for a father figure (CT)

In contrast to these constructions of the 'deviancy' of the taxi queen–driver relationship, some participants stressed the normative nature of transactional relationships in local communities. These participants argued that this was not something new, or much different from traditional African relationships, in which material goods were exchanged as part of the commitment to a relationship (as in *lobola*):

M: 'The beauty of a man is in his cattle', is a Xhosa saying. And even your mother says that if someone sees you, if you have money, and you're 10 [years old], you will marry even when you're 25, if you have money, you will marry that lady (CT)

Similarly, a sentiment was also expressed that these relationships were no different from others in which young women got gifts from their boyfriends and were expected to offer sexual intimacy in return:

F: Other people will see the taxi queen as normal girls because it's like, she's just like, I'm dating a guy who is not a taxi driver, and [name] is dating a guy who is a taxi driver. So we are having, the taxi driver buys me some, some things, and she also gets some things from her boyfriend. So there's no difference. We are normal (SC)

Discussion

While these findings represent the constructions of taxi queens among a group of youth in local communities, it is evident that their understandings of the dynamics of the taxi queen and taxi driver relationship overlap strongly with the reported experiences of taxi queens and taxi drivers themselves (Potgieter, Strebel, Shefer, & Wagner, 2012; Shefer, Strebel, Potgieter, & Wagner, 2011; Van Wieling, 2004). Participants' constructions of the taxi queen and her experiences suggest that this practice is considered widespread and

easily accessible for young women who take public transport. In addition, it is largely regarded as a relationship based on material transactions in exchange for sex and also occurring mainly between young women, particularly of school-going age, and older men, as reflected in media reports about the taxi queen (Jooste, 2008; Mufweba, 2001; Skoch, 2010; Van Breda, 1998). This highlights the particular vulnerability of young women in disadvantaged communities, especially in relation to older, more resourced men, potentially facilitating coercive and abusive relationships, substance abuse, and risks of pregnancy and HIV infection (Eaton, Flisher, & Aaro, 2003; Potgieter et al., 2009; Shisana et al., 2009).

Participants' explanations of why young women become involved in such relationships point to the complexity of the issues at stake. While poverty was believed to be a strong motivation among taxi queens, they were also constructed as being attracted by the status and recognition of the relationship, or expressing emotional needs in the face of family problems. Moreover, an apparent contradiction was evident in depictions of the taxi queen as deviant, promiscuous, and irresponsible, on the one hand, while the relationship was seen to be an expression of 'normal' relationships, in which girls received gifts from boyfriends, on the other hand. This suggests that these relationships reflect to some extent the materiality of everyday relationships among youth (Bhana & Pattman, 2011; Hunter, 2010; Leclerc-Madlala, 2003), as well as embodying contradictory notions of vulnerability and power (Kaufman & Stavros, 2004; Oxlund, 2009).

Striking in the findings was a strong judgemental and moralistic response to the taxi queen herself, as found in other reports on taxi queens (Jooste, 2008; Mohamed, 2005), compared to the more tolerant construction of the driver. Thus, there is the likelihood that these young women are stigmatised rather than supported in their communities. As has been shown with the stigmatisation of those living with HIV (Deacon, Stephney, & Prosalendis, 2005; Rohleder & Gibson, 2006; Shisana et al., 2009), such an othering approach to the young women may work negatively to undermine their ability to seek help or be supported to terminate the inequitable relationship. This may further serve to legitimise the male taxi drivers' behaviours and undermine a focus on their responsibility in the relationship. Furthermore, this stigmatising appears to allow young people to distance themselves from such practices, despite evidence from many other local studies that such dynamics are widespread outside of the transport sector and endemic in a global consumerist society, as outlined above.

The findings presented here thus highlight the contradiction in which the taxi queen's transactional relationship is othered and responded to moralistically, on the one hand, while it is also accepted and shown elsewhere to be normative, on the other hand. The material foundation of sexual relationships in poor communities, in which young women are then particularly vulnerable to unsafe sexual practices and violence, remains a concern that reflects a larger challenge in South African communities than the particular issues raised by the taxi queen phenomenon alone.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declare that they do not have any conflict of interest.

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Notes

1. This was done in order to ascertain whether the phenomenon was also recognised in less urbanised areas.
2. These are the categories currently used by the Department of Labour for the purpose of equity and redress. We use these categories in this report since historical divisions of apartheid are still salient in contemporary South Africa.
3. Coding conventions: M: male; F: female; M1, F2, and so on: different speakers in group; I: interviewer; CT: Cape Town; SC: southern Cape.
4. It is interesting to note how female participants sometimes use the first person when describing the behaviour of taxi queens. Given the exploratory nature of the study, group participants were not screened for whether they had any personal experience of being a taxi queen, so that it is possible that some participants did indeed have such experiences.

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