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YOUTH AND THE ROLE OF DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY IN IMPLEMENTING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS 2030

ABSTRACT

PURPOSE

This paper focuses on technology in identifying challenges and pressures faced by African youth living in a rapidly changing world. It addresses the misuse of modern technology and proposes solutions for message delivery and policy implementation.

DESIGN/METHODOLOGY

Technological challenges faced by African youth are investigated through an examination of statistical data and an evaluation of social media outputs demonstrating misuse and exploitation.

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The strength of any society lies within the strength and resolve of its youth. In an ever-changing world, there is no separate strategy to increase the participation of youth in economic and civil society development other than through technology and in this regard, digital technology. Technology has grown to be an integral part of young people; in reality, toddlers are nowadays animated by apps on iPad than analogue toys, and young people are fascinated by game apps than manual apps. 'Digital technology' is an umbrella term for computer-based products and solutions.

Digital technology encompasses the use of coding information through the use of a binary system of recording in the form of digits 0 and 1, and the processing of this information through this method is referred to as 'digital technology'. The use of mobile devices is in common usage all over the world and so also are laptops, computers and other innovative devices. All these devices operate through a binary computational code that enables information to be stored,

FINDINGS

Young people are critical agents of change in the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals 2030. Youth organisations are harnessing technologies such as mobile phones, social networking and app development to enhance opportunities and quality of life in their communities (Sambira, 2019). However, a major challenge is technological misuse for youth exploitation (Keeley, 2017).

ORIGINAL /VALUE OF THE PAPER

This paper presents an in-depth view of technology-related challenges faced by African youth.

processed and generate data as and when required. Digital technology was developed to reduce the human hours of labour through digitisation of technology.

In the past two decades, digital technology has become a driving force in Africa, just as it is in every part of the world. African children are growing up in a world where mobile technology, apps, social media and other types of online communication influence them in much the same way that people relate to one another, at personal as well as social levels. For instance, access to mobile technology has revolutionised the way in which African people live, communicate, learn and also work. It has been suggested that there are about 650 million mobile phone owners in Africa alone and the use of data, including 3G mobile phones, is also growing rapidly. Although technology has been perceived as one of the development drivers in the world, the question as to its advantages and dangers is worth proper investigation (Pouris and Pouris, 2009).

With all the excitement about the role of digital technology in contributing to social change and development, it is important to state that only 11% of the world's internet subscribers are Africans, whereas only 32.5% of Africans use the internet. The use of the internet is more a prerogative of the youth, who are usually more excited by mobile devices and new apps.

'Youth' is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to the independence of adulthood and an awareness of our interdependence as members of a community (www.unesco.org). According to the UNESCO's definition, 'youth' also indicates the time when a young person may leave compulsory education, and the age at which he/she finds his/her first employment.

According to a report released by the African Union (https://au.int.youth-development), Africa has more than 400 million young people between the ages of 15 and 35 years.

RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The findings can expand awareness and increase support for youth advocacy through education and policy implementation.

KEYWORDS

Youth advocacy; Harnessing technology; Sub-Saharan Africa; Misuse of technology

This number accounts for 70% of the population of Africa. Young people are generally boisterous, talented, creative, technologically adept and ambitious, and they often like to experiment with new ideas.

CHALLENGES FACED BY AFRICAN YOUTH IN TECHNOLOGY DEVELOPMENT

Young people in Africa are faced with many pressures, which makes it difficult for many of them to adjust positively to the opportunities that digital technology offers. Unemployment is one of the major problems experienced by many youth in different countries in Africa. According to a report provided by the World Bank, about 60% of Africa's youths are job-less, with 25% of youth in North Africa being unemployed (www.un.org, magazine.africas). Many youth in Africa suffer from poverty and ignorance. Kevin Balogun, the president of Coca-Cola, said during a presentation in 2016 that more than 10 million graduates are churned out of the more than 668 universities in Africa, and noted that half of them do not get employed.(acetforafrica.org/highlights/unemployment-in-africa-no-jobs-for-50-of-gradu-ates). Youth who are privileged to relocate from Africa leave at any given opportunity to further their education in other western nations; whereas some seek work permit visas, and those who are not so fortunate to leave Africa sometimes experience a sense of hopeless-ness, and are plagued by identity crisis, not knowing who they are or their place in the society. Youth in this situation are more vulnerable to misuse of the internet for fraudulent purposes, especially if they do not have any family support.

Despite these challenges, the contributions of African youth in the field of technology are worth mentioning. African youth who explore positive areas of technology have started taking charge of their future in this way, through their home-grown innovative ideas. Nigeria, for example, sports hundreds of hubs in the city; many young people are quick to churn out mobile apps such as traffic-based apps, eduApps and mHealth apps, whereas many are constrained by socioeconomic circumstances that prevent them from advancing their innovation.

It is important to stress that there are other mobile apps whose innovation has stood the test of time. Mobile bank money transfers constitute a growing market, making it possible for people to transfer and send money without the need to physically visit a bank. One such company is known as 'Paga', based in Nigeria. The company was founded eight years ago, and it obtained a full mobile licence to operate from the central bank. MedAfrica is another mobile app that was developed in Kenya about eight years ago. The objective of this app was to help patients diagnose symptoms and access directories of doctors and hospitals that can assist them. Education, skills development and training are understandably important tools for economic growth in the context of digital technology.

The core of the initiative of youth participation in the Sustainable Development Goals 2030 is to drive action by young people to create a better world and to move beyond the traditional advocacy role. To achieve this goal, it is important to prepare young people for contributing to socioeconomic arenas in their respective countries. Technology has been perceived as one

of the drivers of development in the world and it is something with which the majority of young people all over the world are acquainted.

To empower the youth and the entire societies in sub-Saharan Africa, digital technology must be accorded the importance that it deserves. Such sustainable development can be achieved via the provision of proper tools to be utilised for the deployment of the youth in sub-Saharan Africa (Goody, 2018). Youth advocacy, in terms of technology, is one of the tools that can be used to empower the youth in African societies; however, there are limitations to the effectiveness in the use of digital technology.

Aside from the perennial disadvantages that are common to many African countries listed earlier, such as unemployment and poverty, one of the barriers that may hinder the spread of digital technology is language. Language in Africa is not universal among all countries. For example, there are Francophone countries, Anglophone countries, as well as Arabophone and Lusophone countries. It is important to state that many of these new digital technologies originate in English. State governments may not necessarily allocate funds to disseminate this into local languages, which may create a barrier to the growth in technology.

THE IMPORTANCE OF YOUTH ADVOCACY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

The role that youth advocacy plays in Africa should not be understated. Youth advocacy bridges the gap between the youth, communities and other government stakeholders. If a particular youth advocacy organisation is well structured, it can also help strengthen the voices and participation of young people in digital technology and sustainable development.

It is critical to note that for youth advocacy programmes to be effective and achieve the desired goals, the shortcomings, advantages and available improvements on existing technological advancements must be assessed (Schmidt and Avery, 1983). At the same time, the technological tools play a critical role in the youth advocacy process. It is important for youth advocacy to understand the weaknesses and strengths of the youth, as this will help them develop a system that will favour sustainable development engagement among the youth of sub-Saharan Africa (Shea, 2006).

According to Filmer and Fox (2014), advocacy among the youth, especially in Africa, is of the greatest importance. African youth in the sub-Saharan region are growing amidst challenges such as lack of employment and completion of education. A critical part of youth advocacy is vested in understanding the needs of the youth in relation to the prevailing economic conditions.

According to Morgan (2016), the role of a youth advocate can be the same the world over; their roles depend on several factors, but the main determinant of their duties and responsibilities is advocacy that is tailored to the challenges facing the youth of a particular area. In this regard, challenges for youth in sub-Saharan Africa are not the same as those of the youth in other parts of the western world.

Young people resort to the internet to find ideas and help, and sometimes this turns out to be lucky for them. It is a matter of chance since they do not go online searching for something specific that will help them, but simply to try their luck. Accessing the internet in this way also places them at the mercy of fraudulent individuals who may play on their innocence by involving them in fraudulent transactions. In this event, young people seeking help on the internet by the use of available technology meet with social media that diverts their attention; this leads to misuse of the technology. Most young people in sub-Saharan Africa misuse the internet and regard it as a means only to socialise rather than to find a solution to their immediate problems (McCann et al., 2016).

The role of youth advocates in sub-Saharan Africa is to educate the youth on available opportunities, and on how to use the knowledge of technology to their advantage. The analysis of personal needs is yet another role that advocacy should address, so as to form the basis of appropriate counselling. More generally, youth advocates should monitor residents in a region so as to provide crisis intervention as the need arises (Ayele et al., 2017).

The challenges faced by African youth in gaining access to digital technology such as social media are broadly categorized in a study by Porter (2016). It is estimated that half of the young people in Africa use the internet for interaction with their peers and the rest of the world. In other words, very few individuals use technology to find more skills. In fact, it has been shown that the number of young people trying to enrol in online courses is very low compared with those signing in to social media accounts. This development is not limited to African youth, and it becomes a global problem.

In recent times, there has been an alarming rate of misuse of social media platforms for assessing online music that glorifies violence as well as movies that exalt indecent dressing and immorality. The platforms that show the highest levels of misuse of modern technology among African youth are Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp, and more recently, Snapchat. Many of the problems that the African continent face are diverse and originate from the authorities themselves (Fox et al., 2016).

The inadequacy of training institutions is a major problem faced by sub-Saharan Africa, for the reason that the rates at which the population is growing are higher than the rates at which the number of schools and other educational institutions are growing. According to UNDP statistics (Lim, 2018), schools and higher learning institutions in sub-Saharan Africa are inadequate, resulting in a poor quality of education compared with global standards.

As the quality of education does not meet the market needs and does not deliver the knowledge and skills required, lack of technological knowledge limits young people's ability to utilise the technology, leading to misuse of the available technology (Beegle et al., 2016). Scholarly research has confirmed that in this era of the digital world, youth have to be empowered technologically so as to change the way they use and perceive the technology of the day.

It is also vital to equip the youth with skills to use technology for creative purposes, so that they can develop their hidden artistic selves. For example, rather than visiting social media for social interactions and entertainment alone, they can use it for their personal development.

This is where the role of youth advocacy comes in handy, as this can be achieved through the creation of awareness, by building up institutions that will embrace technology for sustainable development among African youth.

African countries are now developing and understanding the importance of technology, even though there are still elements of caution exercised by some Africans. This is because some Africans in the older generation still view technology as an encroachment on African values, to the extent that not all elderly people would use mobile phones but prefer to use landline telephones, nor would they use computers or the internet. There are still government establishments that do not have access to internet, for example school libraries.

Prior to social media, the television (analogue technology) was the medium used for watching movies and it was more of a family activity for many families. With the trends in digital technology, young people are able to assess movies and information without the permission of their parents or the guidance of a responsible adult. It is now common for a teenager to have three different email addresses, only one of which is officially known, for the sake of being able to access emails without parental guidance.

The misuse of digital technology can be enabled through raising an awareness of the positive values that digital technology brings and also through training in new technology advancement. Experts can be invited to train young people in areas of innovation such as 'Automation and Artificial Intelligence', 'digital enterprise' and 'internet of things' (IOC), to mention just a few. These objectives can be achieved with the co-operation of both the public and private sectors working together in a commitment to developing young people who are interested in this field.

It is important to state that young people in many rural areas in Africa are still struggling to acquire the basic skills in utilising internet access, through trial and error, thereby leading them to the misuse of technology, for example using data to access obscene images or internet scams. According to a study by Adeoti (2017), it is estimated that 80% of the sub-Saharan youth are not technologically empowered and most of them apply only basic skills in the utilisation of technology. With regard to social media platforms, a higher percentage of young people in sub-Saharan Africa are active on social media throughout a normal day. It is true that they learn from these interactions, but the main learning encompasses social development rather than technological insights.

It is clear that many of the young people in Africa do not understand the potential of digital technology. Even though many youth seek employment after finishing their education, very few of them have an idea of how to use technology to develop and create jobs for themselves. In fact, there are few young people in Africa who engage in application development, compared with the rest of the world. Most of them are on social sites and are very active, but this is an indication that they are not likely to be utilising technology to improve their living standards, but to socialise and keep in touch. Youth organisations that concentrate on youth advocacy are emphasising the usage of phones by young people to explore the internet as a way to empower them. It was found that once the youth are engaged with mobile phones and have that knowhow, their minds will be opened such that they will be able to find opportunities online (Xu et al., 2016).

The aspect of application development generally starts through online access. As much as education and learned skills, the youth need to understand what the technology demands and the manner in which they can deliver their products to the online market. Application development is one of the areas that can be used by youth advocates to empower and elevate the living standards of the African youth. These areas of development have shown slow progress in the past but, more recently, a good number of Africans have been witnessed as engaging in application development. If this were introduced to them at an early stage, studies such as this one would find that more of them would be self-reliant (Osabutey and Jin, 2016).

In other parts of the world, students as young as nineteen years of age are engaging in technological income-generating activities such as content creation and application development; whereas the youth in sub-Saharan Africa perceive technology as a thing for fully grown adults, and at the same time reserved for the most learned individuals. It is of the essence for existing youth advocates and organisations to embrace teaching and youth empowerment regarding the need for them to understand the income-generating potential of technology. By educating the youth on the constructive use of technology, many will move from employment dependency towards a self-reliant society, and will develop entrepreneurial skills.

This could be a means towards eradicating the misuse of technology, as the sub-Saharan youth tend to use the technology and internet access for socialising, which has proven to be the most common type of utilisation by young people in Africa. However, one of the challenges that does not originate from the youth themselves in sub-Saharan Africa is that the mobile telephony industry has made it difficult for young people to acquire mobile phones due to the high cost of buying phones, high taxation, and laws regarding the operation of internet provider companies (Heeks, 2017). Therefore, there should be an understanding between the governments and the youth organisations to provide a conducive environment for young people to explore and utilise technology to better their lives.

If this had been done in the past, the youth in Africa would not find technology a complex affair, as it would have been integrated into their daily life activities. As mentioned earlier, the education systems in Africa did not provide a foundation for the introduction of technological learning at an early stage of youth, compared with other countries of the world. Therefore, the findings recommend that education systems should include a technology-related syllabus, so that by the time the learners finish their schooling, they will have mastered the skills of using technology to improve their life. Rapid population growth across the continent and the anticipation of millions of new technology users in the next five years places additional pressure on African governments to make pivotal policy decisions around cyber security, surveillance, internet access, digital rights and data governance.

Domestic, economic and political pressures, an evolving global order, and a pattern of knee-jerk responses by African governments to the challenges of new technologies make the results of these policies even more critical for the African continent (Abate et al., 2016). The lack of technological policies and their poor implementation can lead to economic and political instability, and the effects of these are magnified in African countries with weak rule

of law or high debt burdens. Currently, only 14 of Africa's 54 countries have data protection and privacy laws, and only 9 of these are well enforced. Technology governance and policy are also influencing how African nations navigate an increasingly uncertain global order. A recent report by Freedom House alleged that China is sharing its methods for surveillance and control over digital platforms with African countries.

In a growing contest for technological dominance, this agreement could have potentially global ramifications and give China an advantage against the United States and other competitors in the race for Artificial Intelligence (AI). Currently, one of the biggest flaws in Artificial Intelligence is the 'Fuelled facial recognition software'. In March 2018, the Zimbabwe government signed a strategic partnership with the Gunagzhou-based startup Cloudwalk Technology. The objective was to create a large-scale facial recognition program throughout Zimbabwe. If this partnership kicks off positively, there would be an opportunity for the youth in Zimbabwe to develop technologies that would be able to recognise facial features other than the conventional white, especially when these technologies are less accurate when it comes to identifying the faces of women and black people.

Although Artificial Intelligence is becoming recognised in some countries in Africa, its growth is still at the developing stage. Recently, the Google tech giant opened its first Artificial Intelligence lab in Accra, with the hope that this would create an enabling environment to support researchers and other entrepreneurs within the agricultural sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Governments and institutions are in the best position to find solutions to the misuse of technology. The public and private sectors should work collaboratively to enhance the skills of young people in the areas of creative innovation. No doubt, that sense of hopelessness caused by unemployment has fuelled the unproductive use of social media by some people. It is common occurrence for an average African youth to spend more money to buy data just for social interactions, rather than use the data to assess training that would be beneficial to them.

At the same time, experts in the advocacy field are best placed to deliver solutions for educating youth. The government should support and empower youth organisations and not allow them to close down due to lack of funds. Youth advocacy organisations are able to put strategies in place to reduce the risk of misusing digital technology, as they are able to divert the attention of the youth to more meaningful discovery of their creative potential.

Once a strategy is in place, most young people may be seen developing their interest and coming up with activities that embrace technology to carry out business and personal activities (Heeks, 2017). The creation of awareness by youth organisations should be implemented after thorough research, starting from the quality of education and the level of understanding among the youth.

EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY AWARENESS IN AFRICA

The concept of educational technology favours the promotion, development and use of information and communication technologies (ICT), media, and other aspects of education in Africa. By implementing this across various African states, African youth would be introduced to a system that makes them embrace modern means of using technology to provide solutions and reduce misuse. To achieve this, ICT has to be available in state schools, because exposure to ICT would enhance students' knowledge and understanding in various subjects. Most schools in the rural areas in Africa do not have computer systems or IT systems for distribution of information.

BARRIERS TO GROWTH IN THE TECH INDUSTRY

Although technology in Africa is making huge advances, there are barriers to its expansion, for example the supply of power. The lack of access to electricity is a perennial problem that spreads across many African countries and this is not restricted to rural areas alone, but it extends to the cities as well. As a consequence of this, technocrats and youths interested in developing a career in this field are constrained by the costs of obtaining sufficient or constant electricity to support their growing technology businesses. This is the situation of young entrepreneurs who started internet cafés. Aside of the costs of investing in computers and internet access, some of these have to battle with erratic supply of electricity. An internet café cannot run efficiently and earn profit, if there is no electricity, thus causing some to pack up the business.

It is interesting to state that most internet café users are young people who visit the cafes for official and personal matters. In recent years, many youth have switched to mobile technology, thus reducing visits to internet cafés except when it cannot be avoided for printing or scanning; this development has led to the collapse of the internet café businesses in some areas.

Young people see technology as an aspect of their life, even though many do not have the skills to utilise its development. It is imperative for stakeholders, policymakers and youth advocacy to focus more on building the skills capacity of these youth to make them more competitive in an ever-changing global economy.

African countries need to make technology and innovation a priority. In previous years, technology was allocated with limited funding, making the entire continent lag behind the developing world. There are government buildings in Africa that do not have computers or access to the internet. This suggests that some state governments in Africa do not consider the development of technology as an option, but they focus more on allocating funding to other infrastructure.

In other words, technology in Africa is not given or perceived as a first priority (Adukaite et al., 2016). The other solution to the misuse of the technology in Africa is providing an

enabling environment to support programmes in Africa. An enabling environment could be provided through a political platform that will allow support groups to offer their resources to create awareness and educate the youth about the importance of technology in their lives.

In some countries in Africa, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sudan and Somalia, the political environment does not allow any youth support programmes to be initiated in the region. Therefore, it is up to the authorities to make sure that the political environment is conducive for youth support organisations to set up camp to create awareness of technology matters in sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, technological misuse can also be eradicated in Africa through the incorporation of all stakeholders in the economy in Africa.

Researching the best strategies to install a system that supports technological advancement is the key step to introduce technological mentality among the African youth. Policies regarding the technology are central to its advancement. The policies currently available are long overdue in Africa and little has been done in policy amendments to accommodate technological dynamics and needs (Abrami et al., 2016). Significant and sustainable progress towards economic transformation of Africa is not possible without tapping the potentials of the young people.

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