My Mobile Phone and I: Youth Culture, Identity and Lifestyle in Kenya

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ABSTRACT

This paper analysed mobile phone usage and youth culture in Kenya on communication, social media use, and its influence on identity and youth lifestyle. Using the Uses and Gratifications Theory, the paper analyzed relationship between young people, their mobile phone use, their social, informational, and entertainment needs in relations to engagement with local and global cultures. The findings showed that mobile phones have changed youth communication culture which has enabled the move from in-person interactions to digital communication through social media. This has also led to the creation of online identities, youth expressing themselves and connecting with wider global communities. There is also, influence on youth and their lifestyle choices, especially, in fashion, entertainment, and careers through exposure to global trends, online. Additionally, expanded access to information among youth, empowered youth though with exposure to misinformation, disinformation, and information overload. The study concludes that while mobile phones have enhanced connectivity and self-expression among Kenyan youth, they have also posed challenges such as the risk of cyberbullying and threat to social skills associated with face-to-face socialization. Promotion of digital literacy programs for youth, balanced media consumption habits, and programs for positive social and educational outcomes can help.

Keywords: *mobile phone; youth culture; identity; lifestyle; Kenya*

INTRODUCTION

Kenya, with a fast-growing digital economy, has experienced a huge increase in mobile phone access, with about 54.5 million mobile subscribers as of 2022, according to the Communications Authority of Kenya (CA, 2022). This phenomenon has changed the communication lifestyle of Kenyan youth who make up a sizeable portion of the Kenyan population. Among the youth in Kenya, mobile phones are not only seen as communication gadgets but also tools for interaction with each other, changing long term consumption and reduced poverty among communities in Kenya (Suri, 2016).

The way the youth use telephone in communication is one of the important areas where mobile phones have been seen to change lifestyle. Before the change brought by mobile phones physical meetings and the use of fixed land line to communicate was the order of the day. Now youth use mobile phones to keep connecting with friends, acquaintances, and family members. The primary major ways of communication have now become text messaging, messaging apps like *WhatsApp*, and social media spaces like *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok* as a study by

Omipidan, et.al. (2024) indicates. This situation has had a significant hand in how young people communicate and perceive relationships according to Munyao (2024).

With mobile phone, the youth in Kenya have also made it a culture in social media. Young people can now participate in local and global conversation through social media, which they access using their mobile devices. This arena serves as a space where youth can identify themselves, share their life stories and participate in their online culture as part of global citizens. As Echesony (2024) says, social media has become an important platform where urban youth engage, express, and negotiate their identities. Because of vitality, the platforms provide access a range of cultural expressions, facilitating the blending and reshaping of traditional and modern cultural elements

Through mobile phones, information and global trends are more accessible through the internet through mobile phones. Through online interactions youth are more aware of a variety of ideas and cultures which influence the careers they would want to pursue, dressing, and the media they consume according to Njoroge (2018). This situation has led to youth culture being more of some mix, cosmopolitan – still local but open for influence by the global scene.

The fact that mobile phones are way more accessible has radically changed youth culture in how youth send and receive messages, interactions, expressions, and their cultures. Though mobile with a wide range provides benefits including opportunities to express self, information, and connectivity, coming with bigger challenges which are changing youth culture. Young people now prefer Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp instead of meeting people in person. This new move has led to young people expressing selves through commenting, messaging, and using likes as new ways of relaying feelings. Relationships among young people are largely now built and kept by interactions in the digital space. Youth in Kenya are now more aware of global culture because of social media which has led to new values being embraced, trends in fashion, and behaviour that may be opposite of traditional culture. This divide between tradition and modernity, especially among young people in Kenya, has created new identity in young peoples' culture and engage in global influences; hence the aspects of self and community are not fully understood and need a closer look.

Furthermore, new risks have come with the use of phone technology. Issues on privacy, and bullying on the internet, the use of mobile phones has also introduced new risks, such as cyberbullying, privacy concerns, and the spread of misinformation which can have negative

aspects on the how youth socialize and their health. Even with the increased access to mobile devices, an understanding of how the devices affect youth culture is limited, especially in Kenya, which is a developing country but with high phone and internet connectivity

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth culture all over the world, Kenya included, has been largely affected by accelerated access to mobile phones. Since young people in Kenya started using mobile devices, communication patterns have undergone many changes. The use of mobile phones, social media, and instant messaging has largely supplanted more conventional forms of communication including landline calls and in-person meetings. The decrease in in-person meetings associated with this shift has an effect on the way young people learn to communicate with one another Omipidan, et.al (2024) indicates that young people prefer text communication, which has resulted in the development of new linguistic expressions including slang, shorthand, and emoji icons.

For young people in Kenya, having access to social media through a mobile phone is vital. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media platforms serve as the primary hubs for socializing, sharing information, and self-expression. According to Ndlela & Mulwo (2017), youth culture in Kenya has become fundamentally influenced by social media, which has affected young people's views of the world and themselves. According to Chen (2023), adolescents who utilize social media platforms to establish digital personas have also been observed to cultivate online personas that diverge from their offline personalities. Teenagers may experience a lack of authenticity in their social interactions and have several identities because of this.

Beyond the ways that youth use social media and communicate, mobile phones have had an impact on the identities and lifestyles of Kenyan young people. Because they are constantly exposed to cultures across the globe through mobile phones, Kenya's youth have taken up new attitudes, fashion trends, and behaviours. The usage of mobile phones has led to a greater globalization of youth culture, as Njoroge (2018) highlights. As Livingstone, et.al. (2017) points out, social networking, online gaming, and streaming films have become major hobbies for young people. This is predominantly facilitated by mobile phones.

METHODS

This study's target population for qualitative data consisted of frequent mobile phone users in Nairobi, Kenya, from the ages of fifteen to twenty-four. The study used a descriptive research approach to make it possible to examine in-depth, how mobile phones affect many facets of culture among Kenyan youth. Understanding the connections between mobile phone use and its impact on young people, social media involvement, and construction of identity was explored through this approach. Focus group discussions (FGDs) for shared experiences and in-depth interviews for personalized look into how mobile phones shape youth identity and lifestyle, were used to collect data for this paper.

Participants were chosen in multiple stages from Kenya's capital City, Nairobi. This made sure that young people from various socioeconomic backgrounds and places were represented. A total of 68 respondents in all, two from each of Nairobi City County's sub-counties, balancing gender, were sought out for interviews, and five focus groups with eight to ten participants were held. Furthermore, five comprehensive interviews were conducted with important informants and specialists.

Data on mobile phone usage, social media involvement, and the perceived impact of mobile phones on identity and lifestyle were gathered using an interview guide. Both closed-ended and open-ended questions were included in the interview guide, and focus groups were held to investigate the concerns on teenage mobile phone usage in Kenya. Participants were asked to explain how social media and mobile communication have affected social interactions and their identity. The FGDs were moderated to promote candid communication and include a variety of observations from members. A purposive sample of young people in Kenya's capital who were purposefully chosen for their being frequent users of social media and mobile phones were also interviewed in-depth.

Data from interviews was thematically analysed to investigate issues between several factors, including identity formation and cell phone usage. Thematic analysis was used to assess both the transcribed material from FGDs and the in-depth interviews. Themes of identity, social media use, and communication styles were found and grouped.

The participants were informed of the purpose of the study as well as their rights to confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Every participant provided their informed

permission, and safety measures were taken to ensure that the responders would not suffer injury or be treated unjustly during the study.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The way most young people in Kenya communicate now is greatly influenced by mobile phones, which shows Kenya's unique social context as well as the changing nature of technology. Focus groups, and interviews, yielded a wealth of evidence that revealed several important themes about how mobile phones have impacted youth communication.

One of the outcomes is the shift from traditional forms of communication, like face-to-face meetings and landline phone talks, to digital communication which has been facilitated by mobile phones. Social networking sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp, text messaging, and instant messaging applications have become the primary means of communication for young people in Kenya. This tendency is particularly pronounced in metropolitan areas since internet access is more commonly available there. The convenience, speed, and expressive options offered by mobile phones—such as voice notes, multimedia sharing, and emoticons—have made young people's social ties more and more dependent on them.

> *Mobile phones together with revolutions in technology has changed communication among young people a great deal. There is no border and time limit just as the speed and convenience is perfect. It serves the purpose instantly and, in a way, so convenient. It's a whole new world. [KI3]*

Mobile phones have both facilitated and complicated interpersonal relationships among young Kenyan adults. By enabling young people to stay in close contact with friends and family even when they reside far away, technology has contributed to the improvement of relationships. The convenience and speed of communication have enabled the maintenance of social bonds, as many respondents said, which are dependent on regular and casual contacts through phone communication. Others, on the other hand, noted that the focus on digital communication has led to misunderstandings and superficial connections. Sometimes, interactions using text-based communication are of inferior quality because they lack non-verbal cues and move quickly.

> *"The focus on digital communication has created a gap in real genuine understanding, the African way, of each other among young people in Kenya. Yes, it's easier to connect online, but interactions like these ones often lack depth, leading to misunderstandings and misinterpretations. We're quick to communicate but slower to truly engage, leaving us with relationships that feel more superficial than meaningful. That's the bigger challenge we have despite the so-called developments in communication" [KI2]*

The widespread use of mobile phones has another impact, the emergence of new communication norms and etiquette. Data from this study shows that some habits, such as sending texts instead of calling and anticipating a prompt reply, have been deeply engrained in youth culture in Kenya. This change shows a broader trend in Kenyan society in the way communication is valued and practiced now than before. Calling has become less common in daily interactions and has instead it's been replaced by texting and messaging, especially for formal or significant conversations. The Communication Authority of Kenya reports indicate that more Kenyan phone users prefer internet calling and texting with the minutes of use per month per subscription in 2023 being 123.4 minutes. Short messages sent per month per subscription were 65.4 messages (CA, 2024).

The social media era has made it even more difficult to distinguish between private and public life, since young people often modify their interactions for wider audiences.

Digital Communication And Social Inclusion

Mobile phones' contribution to Kenyan youth's increased social involvement is another significant finding. To obtain information, engage in social and political discussions, and create groups based on common interests, mobile phones are indispensable for a large number of people. This study shows how social media platforms have provided voice and an opportunity for connection with people outside of local surroundings to marginalized groups, such young people from poorer socioeconomic origins or those who live in rural regions. But there are certain difficulties with this digital inclusion. According to the study, differences in the availability of cell phones and dependable internet connections might reduce the advantages for some groups and worsen already-existing inequities.

> *"Social media has empowered marginalized groups, such as youth from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and informal settlements, to connect beyond local boundaries and share their voices. However, challenges remain in achieving true digital inclusion. Limited smartphone access and expensive internet costs sometimes undermine these benefits, which in turn reinforces the already existing inequalities by limiting online opportunities for those with little resources."[K1]*

This study also shows that, young people in Kenya have changed their language and communication habits because of using mobile phones. Kenya's linguistic variety is reflected in the frequent practice of text messages and social media postings combining local dialects, Swahili, and English. Youths who communicate in many languages frequently exhibit creativity and adaptability, creating specialized slang and shorthand for use on digital platforms. Another layer

of expression that has grown common in young relationships is the usage of GIFs and emojis as a visual communication tool. But given the changing nature of communication, there are concerns about how language usage and literacy may be affected in the long run, especially in younger users.

> *In Kenya, we use a mixture of Kiswahili, English, and our local languages in texts and social media posts, making our own slang and shortcuts, language if you may. It's a way we found to express ourselves and connect due to the digital platforms and mobile telephones. Emojis and GIFs are another form altogether, adding a layer which helps us as young people to say more than words and help show what we feel in just one image*[FGD2]

Social Media Engagement

Mobile phones are the main medium through which young people communicate with various platforms, and as a result, social media has a significant influence on youth culture in Kenya. Social media is used as a tool for communication as well as a platform for identity building and lifestyle expression, according to the research findings, which show a complex web of interaction patterns. The percentage and level of social media use among young Kenyans is among the most startling findings. Youth spend most of their time on social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok. Most young people use social media many times a day, with many of them claiming to spend several hours a day interacting with online material. The ubiquity of inexpensive smartphones and mobile data plans has made social media access more accessible to a wider range of socioeconomic classes, which in turn has enabled this high level of participation. What this means is that social networking is has become very popular among youth and continues to grow in admiration Noori, et.al, (2023). Additionally, social media has now changed from being simply a passive consumption tool to becoming an active arena for content creation. Many young people in Kenya are not only content consumers, but also creators, utilizing platforms to express their perspectives, promote their abilities, and connect with a larger global audience. This active participation has ramifications for how identity and lifestyle are built and perceived in the young community.

Social media has also significantly changed communication dynamics among Kenyan youth. Traditional forms of communication, such as face-to-face interactions and phone calls, are increasingly being supplemented or replaced by messaging apps and social media platforms. WhatsApp has emerged as a dominant communication tool, with its group chat feature allowing for both intimate and broad-based communication. Youths use WhatsApp to maintain close-knit

friendships, family connections, and larger social networks, often blurring the lines between different social circles.

Furthermore, during this study, respondents indicated that social media creates a sense of immediacy and constant connectivity, where young people feel the need to be continuously online and available.

> *"Social media is just part of our lives as it makes us feel like we have to be online most of the time. There's always this pressure to know what's happening to friends and people and also to respond quickly, stay updated, and be 'in the know' constantly. There is always that feeling that if you're not online, you're missing out big time or just being left behind. On our part as young people, this can be sometimes overwhelming, but it's just part of our daily lives now."[IDI4]*

This has both positive and negative implications. On the one hand, it enables real-time communication and the rapid dissemination of information; on the other hand, it can lead to stress, anxiety and mental disorders associated with the pressures of maintaining an online presence and responding promptly to messages and notifications according into research by both Noori, et.al (2023) and Khalaf, et.al (2023).

Influence on Identity and Lifestyle

Social media has a complex influence on Kenyan youth's identity and lifestyle. Social media platforms allow young people to experiment with many parts of their identities, frequently presenting different versions of themselves. Many young people are highly aware of the image they project online and try to always manage their social media profiles to correspond with desired views, through many ways: photo selection, status changes, or content sharing.

Social media is also an effective instrument for influencing lifestyle, with trends, fashion, music, and cultural practices spreading quickly across platforms. Youths are exposed to both international and local influences, which they incorporate into their everyday lives. For example, the emergence of "influencer culture" in Kenya has seen many striving to live the lifestyles of prominent social media celebrities, who frequently set fashion, beauty, and leisure trends. This means that Kenyan youth face many challenges due to exposure to other lifestyles, especially online. Therefore there is rising worry about the temptation to adhere to other values, spread through online exposure, which sometimes result in a gap between online identities and actual reality. Furthermore, the emphasis on materialism and consumerism advocated by influencers and social media advertising

can lead to unreasonable expectations and feelings of inadequacy among young people who are unable to meet these standards.

> *"There is this strong idea being pushed always through social media that success means having flashy lifestyle, cars, clothing and all which is mostly promoted by online and digital influencers. For young people who can't afford that, it creates this gap where they feel like they're not up to standard or have been left behind. It's an endless charade and pressure place which is filled with aren't in consonance with real life."[KI5]*

Kenyan youth also participate in social media for reasons other than personal identification and lifestyle, such as community building and activism. Platforms such as Twitter and Facebook have become critical arenas for political and social activity, where young people rally around causes that are important to them. Hashtags like #OccupyParliement and #RejectFinanceBill2024 gained hold in Kenya in 2024, with young people using these platforms to express their concerns, organize rallies, and demand responsibility from politicians. Kenyan youth have become increasingly active participants in the political process and social discourse because of their use of social media for activism. It also created a feeling of community and belonging, as young people connected with like-minded people both in Kenya and throughout the world, forming networks that transcended geographical limits.

The extensive usage of mobile phones among Kenyan youth has had a substantial impact on identity development since mobile phones allow for the building of identity through a variety of channels, including social media participation, peer interaction, and access to multiple cultural narratives. Mobile phones, particularly through social media platforms, equip Kenyan adolescents with strong tools for self-expression. The opportunity to construct profiles, share experiences, and expose oneself to a larger audience has become an important component of identity development.

Young people create digital personalities on sites like *Instagram, TikTok*, and *Facebook*, which frequently reflect their objectives, hobbies, and social affiliations. This self-curation process allows people to experiment with different facets of their identity, often testing out alternative roles, styles, and attitudes before landing on a more solid self-concept.

However, digital self-expression is both powerful and problematic. While on one hand, it helps young people to discover their identities in a reasonably secure and supervised atmosphere. On the other, the temptation to adhere to online trends, as well as the need for social validation through likes, comments, and follows, sometimes cause a mismatch between online identities and

offline reality. This dichotomy presents a conflict between self-discovery and society expectations according to Huang (2021).

Peer Influence and Social Validation

Mobile phones have also heightened the impact of peer influence in identity development. Young Kenyans are constantly exposed to their peers' thoughts, attitudes, and lives due to continual connectedness. Group conversations, social media interactions, and the sharing of multimedia information through mobile phones all create a feedback loop in which peer acceptance becomes an important aspect in forming one's identity.

The study's findings indicate that peer impact is especially significant in the contexts of fashion, language, and social conduct. For example, what is fashionable within peer groups frequently influences the adoption of specific terminology, dress trends, or music tastes. This need to fit in and be accepted by peers can sometimes lead to the adoption of identities that do not entirely represent an individual's actual self, but rather reflect a collective identity created by group dynamics.

> *"We have no choice sometimes because we have to fit in, we just have to adopt parts of the group's behaviour and identity, even if it doesn't fully represent some of us. There is always that pressure to belong and mirror what's popular or trendy. You just have to wear a group identity, some kind of a mask producing a version of yourself that matches the group looks, rather than put up your real usual personality."[FGD1]*

However, peer pressure, has positive aspects. Respondents argued that mobile phones also help   young people form supportive peer networks where they at times get affirmation and encouragement for expressing themselves authentically. These networks frequently provide areas for young people to explore and express their cultural background, personal beliefs, and preferences without fear of condemnation.

Cultural Hybridity and Global Influences

The study also showed the significance of mobile phones in exposing Kenyan adolescents to a variety of cultural influences, which has contributed to the development of hybrid identities. This is because, with access to global media, social media influencers, and online communities, young Kenyans are now increasingly including components of both local and global cultures into their identities. This is shown in how young people mix and manage both traditional norms and modern lifestyles.

This hybrid identity is seen in many fronts. An example can be seen in the fusion of local languages with English and other global languages in everyday communication.

> *"We see hybrid identity all the time in many aspects of young Kenyans. It is best exemplified in how we blend local languages with English or even global slang. To hear young Kenyans, mix Kiswahili, Sheng, and English in one conversation is not abnormal. It's a clear manifestation that we live in a multicultural society."[KI4]*

However, while hybridity promotes innovation and adaptation, there are concerns about cultural authenticity and the possible erosion of traditional African values. Global culture, particularly Western culture, has had a substantial effect on Kenyan youth identity. However, cultural hybridity has also seen a transformation in the way young people in Kenya access information which has contributed to identity formation through self-education. Youths in this study argued that they use their phones to seek information on topics related to personal development, career aspirations, and social issues.

Lifestyle Changes

The study's findings show that mobile phones have dramatically transformed Kenyan youth's lifestyles, making many changes in their daily routines, social contacts, and general attitude to life. Communication patterns have shifter among young Kenyans because of mobile phone use. Conventional face-to-face contact is rapidly being augmented and, in some circumstances, supplanted by digital communication. Social media like WhatsApp, Telegram, and other social media networks are increasingly the key channels through which young people communicate with friends, family, and peers. This has resulted in several lifestyle changes. First, communication has become more regular and rapid, allowing young people to stay in touch with their social circles despite physical distance. This continual connection has resulted in a blurring of the lines between personal and social life, as young people are always "online" and ready to communicate with others. This has had both beneficial and harmful consequences on young peoples' lifestyle. On one hand, it has promoted better social relationships and a sense of community; while on the other, it can lead to fatigue and a sensation of being overwhelmed by the demands of continual contact leading to other psychological challenges.

Mobile phones have also introduced new communication norms, such as the use of emoticons, memes, and abbreviations, which have become an integral part of how Kenyan youth express themselves. These digital communication patterns have altered not just how young people

communicate, but also how they view and interact with one another, impacting their lifestyle choices.

Mobile phones have also changed young Kenyans' consumption of entertainment, resulting in major lifestyle changes.

Economic Empowerment and Mobile Commerce

The introduction of mobile phones has also resulted in lifestyle changes through economic empowerment for youth and the growth of mobile commerce. Mobile phones have given Kenyan youth access to previously unavailable financial services, entrepreneurial prospects, and new type of jobs. M-Pesa and other mobile money services have transformed how young people handle their finances, allowing them to easily save, transfer, and receive funds. This financial inclusion has had a significant influence on their daily lives, particularly in terms of financial independence and business decision-making. According to Ndungu (2021), many young people are already running tiny companies, using their mobile phones to reach consumers, make payments, and manage their operations.

Mobile phones have aided the spread of the gig economy among Kenyan young. Young people may now find freelance jobs, give services, and sell items through numerous applications and internet platforms, resulting in a more entrepreneurial and self-sufficient lifestyle. The change to mobile commerce has not only boosted many young people's economic prospects, but has also transformed their attitudes toward work, promoting a more flexible and imaginative approach to employment.

This study also found that mobile phones have produced a new reality in which the digital and physical worlds are increasingly together. It demonstrates that many young people struggle to strike a good balance between these two areas of their lives, resulting in lifestyle modifications that reflect this conflict. On the one hand, mobile phones have improved social connectivity, allowing youths to maintain relationships and access information more easily. However, this constant connectivity can lead to social isolation, as young people tend to prioritize online interactions over in-person relationships. The addictive nature of mobile phones, particularly in terms of social media and gaming, has resulted in difficulties such as sleep deprivation, decreased productivity, and mental health problems, all of which are substantial lifestyle changes with far-reaching repercussions as Nikolic et.al (2023) show. Kenyan youth are becoming more conscious

of these difficulties and actively seeking strategies to limit their mobile phone usage in order to live a more balanced lifestyle. This involves limiting screen time, emphasizing offline activities, and engaging in digital detoxes. Despite these attempts, the widespread presence of mobile phones in their lives makes striking a good balance an ongoing struggle, one that continues to affect Kenyan adolescent lifestyles

CONCLUSION

This paper has shown that traditional face-to-face interactions have been largely displaced by instant messaging and social media platforms, producing an environment continuous connectedness. As Lee (2024) points out, while this transition follows worldwide trends in which digital communication is a force on evolution of language among urban youth, the Kenyan environment is also characterized by incorporation of local languages and cultural expressions in their digital world. However, as Reuben, et.al. (2021) point out, continual connectedness can lead to problems such as digital reliance and a loss of interpersonal skills.

Social media has evolved as an important venue for young Kenyans to create their identities as. Ndlela & Mulwo (2017) assert and that digital spaces provide unprecedented potential for self-expression, a trend that is evident in Kenya, where young people utilize social media to construct their identities. This phenomenon agrees with Park (2020) who observe that social media provides for both empowerment and pressure to adhere to idealized online personas, a dichotomy that is also seen among Korean youth. Furthermore, cell phones have led to considerable lifestyle modifications. Chege (2019) observes that mobile devices have become crucial to entertainment, employment, and sociability, transforming how young people spend their time and interact with the environment. Similar tendencies have been observed in various African contexts, as stated by Solomon (2020) were mobile phones impact economic activity and access to information.

However, these improvements do not come without consequences. Lorenz-Spreen et al. (2023) raises worries about disinformation and the erosion of traditional values in the digital era, which are relevant to the Kenyan setting, where the flow of global content through mobile phones continues to dilute local values and culture as asserted by Andrew (2023). Additionally, the mental health consequences of excessive mobile phone usage, as explained by Wacks (2021) are many especially among young people and adolescents. However, mobile phones are still important among Kenyan people as they are even key in trust issues as asserted by Parlasca (2020).

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