Transitions to adulthood among young entrepreneurs in the informal mobile telephony sector in Accra, Ghana

Robert L. Afutu-Kotey[a,*], Katherine V. Gough[b], Paul W.K. Yankson[c]

[a] School of Continuing and Distance Education, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana
[b] Department of Geography, Loughborough University, United Kingdom
[c] Department of Geography & Resource Development, University of Ghana, Legon, Ghana

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The rapid expansion of the mobile telephony sector in African countries has been accompanied by the establishment of a wide range of informal support businesses, mostly run by young people. Little is known, however, about the lived experiences of young entrepreneurs working in this rapidly changing, technologically-driven sector. Drawing on qualitative research conducted in Accra, this paper explores young people's experiences of running informal businesses within the mobile telephony sector, including the sale of mobile phones and accessories, repair and technical support services, and the sale of airtime and mobile money services. Fateful and critical moments relating to personal and family events, as well as social networks and structural factors, are shown to mediate young entrepreneurs' chances of success in this new 'niche' economic sub-sector. Despite the challenges they face, the paper illustrates how many of these young people have been able to achieve financial independence, afford rental accommodation, provide support for family members, and establish and sustain households. The mobile telephony sector is shown to be offering young people the opportunity to carve out a living, facilitate transitions into adulthood, and even enable some to move up the social ladder. By highlighting the agency of this group of young people, and for some their success in achieving the status of adulthood through their hard work and ingenuity, this study offers an important counter balance to images of young people in sub-Saharan Africa as being 'stuck' or in 'waithood'.

1. Introduction

Improvements in African countries' economic performance in recent decades have not been matched by better opportunities for young people to obtain formal sector employment (Aryeetey and Baah-Boateng, 2013; Anyidoho, 2013). This has adversely affected their well-being in cities across Africa. Challenges regarding employment and achieving the status of adulthood among young people in many cities in the global South are well documented (Langevang, 2008; Christiansen et al., 2006; Sommers, 2010; Gough et al., 2016). The unemployment situation which propels young people into various forms of informal entrepreneurial activities, and the challenges they face attaining adulthood, are not exclusively a global South phenomenon but are also reported for both the USA and Europe (Bell and Blanchflower, 2011). A notable difference, however, is that in the global South the number of young people who become unemployed or establish informal businesses after completing school is much greater than in the global North (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2013). This challenging situation is compounded by the increasing number of young people acquiring formal education in the midst of an unstable economic landscape.

The challenges faced by young people in the global South, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, have been highlighted by numerous scholars. Christiansen et al. (2006) described the contemporary African youth as a generation born into social environments in which possibilities of earning decent lives are negligible, with many finding themselves stuck in positions of inadequacy having few life chances and bleak prospects. Many young people in an urban African context have been shown to experience highly insecure employment, with this insecurity closely linked to manifestations of insecurity in other aspects of their lives, such as housing and education (Gough et al., 2016). Youth in Africa have thus been depicted as 'stuck' between childhood and adulthood (Sommers, 2012), a situation also designated as 'waithood', which essentially depicts a transitory period experienced by young people anticipating adulthood (Honwana, 2014). During this period of waithood, young people may engage in various activities ranging from street vending, cross-border trade, and involvement in gangs and other criminal activities (Jeffrey and Dyson, 2013).

Despite these depictions of African youth, some young people have

---

assumed a degree of agency in their lives through their engagement in entrepreneurial and other informal activities, which offers them employment avenues and improvements in social mobility. A sector which has experienced increasing youth entrepreneurial activities in Africa over the past two decades is the rapidly expanding mobile telephony sector. In Ghana, for instance, according to the National Communications Authority, the subscriber base to the various mobile telephony networks increased from over 1.5 million in 2004 to about 30 million in 2015. This growth has been accompanied by an increasing number of different types of informal support businesses mostly run by young people. Some of these businesses include sale of mobile phones and accessories, repair and technical support services, and the sale of airtime and mobile money services. Very little is known, however, about the lived experiences of young people in this rapidly changing technologically driven sector.

While there has been some fascinating research on the use of mobile phones by young people in sub-Saharan Africa (Porter et al., 2012, 2015; Hampshire et al., 2015), few studies have been conducted on young people engaged in informal businesses in the mobile telephony sector (see though Afutu-Kotey, 2016; Afutu-Kotey et al., 2017). This paper aims to fill this gap by exploring young people's experiences of running a range of informal businesses within the mobile telephony sector, demonstrating how personal and family events, in addition to social networks and structural factors, influence the chances of success among young people in the mobile telephony sector in Accra.

The paper begins by outlining the debates and conceptualisation of youth transitions into adulthood and the link with entrepreneurship, followed by the methodological and analytical approach to the study. A reconstructed biography of three of the young people interviewed in Accra is then presented, followed by a discussion of the critical events shaping young people's transitions to adulthood within the broader context of social space and time. The specific influence of business engagement in the mobile telephony sector on the transitions of young people to adulthood is then discussed, highlighting their successes and the challenges they face. The final section concludes the paper drawing out the finding that the mobile telephony sector is offering some young people the opportunity to become financially independent and transition into adulthood.

2. Conceptualising youth transitions into adulthood and entrepreneurship

The concept 'youth' is defined sociologically as the transitory period between childhood and adulthood, and the roles, rights and responsibilities that go with it. Early discourse on youth transitions drew on psychological theories, which perceived youthfulness as a distinct stage and a linear progression in the life course (Erikson, 1950; Inhelder and Piaget, 1958). Subsequently, the inadequacy of considering transitions in terms of a linear progression have been widely discussed in the literature (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Worth, 2009; Wyn and Dwyer, 1999). In both the global North and South, changes in education and labour market relations have extended youth transitions and made them more complex than the early discussions suggest (Jeffrey and McDowell, 2004; Valentine, 2003). Contemporary youth transition theories have exposed the fallacy of distinct stages of the life course by addressing new imperatives of a flexible labour market, such as: multiple jobs instead of one career; diverse family dynamics including lower marital rates; and the expansion and prolonged nature of involvement in the education sector (Worth, 2009). Young people's transitions to adulthood have been described as 'waithood' in a section of the literature, as young people stagnate between childhood and adulthood (Honwana, 2014), while others have described transitions among young people as 'emerging adulthood' (Arnett, 2007).

Beck's (1992) concept of individualization has received attention in youth transitions discourse, despite the concept being criticised for placing the blame for failing to attain one's 'choice biography' on the individual, without paying much attention to structural barriers that often impede the opportunity to follow-up desired choices (Skelton, 2002; Worth, 2009). This has led to calls for a shift in focus from perceiving young people as actors to include their relationships, and also from addressing them from perspectives of agency to structural concerns (Ansell, 2014). Giddens (1991) made a useful contribution to individualization debates by arguing that transitions in reflexive modernity are experienced through 'fateful moments' where a person's ontological security is threatened by having to make significant choices about the future. Influenced by Giddens' 'fateful moments', Thomson et al. (2002) conceptualised the concept of 'critical moments', as a way of understanding the key events of transition for young people. As they argue, "the key transitions that might be seen as aspects of adulthood do not occur at the same time or in the same order; their occurrences are not highly correlated, and many of them are reversible" (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, p. 869). Young people, therefore, cross the fluid boundaries between time and space specific notions of childhood, youth and adulthood, making transitions a convoluted process.

Social capital theory has also received considerable attention in some aspects of the transitions literature, with Worth (2009) identifying social capital as perhaps having the strongest influence on contemporary transitions debates. Studies examining social capital and young people have recognized that young people do not only receive capital from their parents and other relations, but also serve as a source of capital within their own peer groups (Helve and Bynner, 2007; Worth, 2009). In many of these studies, social capital has been utilised in exploring issues such as social exclusion, where disadvantaged young people's life choices are limited by the economic, cultural and social resources available to them (Arnot et al., 2012). Additionally, social capital theory has been used with other theories of agency and identity, balancing individual choice and structural constraints (Holland et al., 2007).

In a Ghanaian context, there has been limited empirical research on young people's transitions, although the few existing works give credence to the complex and unpredictable nature of youth transitions to adulthood. Commenting on the transition potential of young people in the city of Accra, Langevang (2008, p. 2039) argued that "achieving respectable adulthoods in present-day Accra is a convoluted journey involving the careful management of social relationships." Young people do not only move into and out of adulthood, but have to carefully manage these processes by assuming different roles and responsibilities. The complex and unpredictable nature of youth transitions is often attributed to difficult economic circumstances, albeit the role of education and training should not be understated (Clark, 1999; Bennell, 2007; Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). As in much of sub-Saharan Africa, the inability of the Ghanaian economy to offer formal sector employment to young people has long been identified as contributing to delays in their transitions to adulthood (Clark, 1999; Bennell, 2000, 2007).

In the midst of the difficult transitions confronting young people, entrepreneurship is seen as an alternative means for income generation and moving up the social ladder. Entrepreneurship has been shown to enable young people to become integrated into the labour market, contribute to their economic independence, and to help combat poverty (Schoof, 2006; Gough et al., 2016; Gough and Langevang, 2016). In a global South context, much of this entrepreneurship takes place within the informal economy, which can be defined as "economic activities that occur outside of formal institutional boundaries but which remain within informal institutional boundaries for large segments of society" (Webb et al., 2013, p. 1). This includes a range of self-employed persons who mainly work in unregistered small entities (Chen, 2012).

There has been little systematic research on entrepreneurship among young people operating in the informal economy in sub-Saharan Africa and the significance of entrepreneurship in the lives of the young entrepreneurs (though see Gough and Langevang, 2016 for exceptions). This paper aims to contribute to addressing this knowledge gap by focussing on self-employed young people working within the mobile