“I Am Not Human Without My Phone”: How the Socio-Cultural Realities of Liberia Shape Liberian Mobile Youth Culture

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Abstract

Mobile youth culture (MYC) is a concept that refers to the distinctive ways in which young people adopt and use mobile phones. However, most studies on MYC are situated in the Global North where the lived realities of teenagers are different from teenagers in the Global South. Through an investigation of how MYC manifests in Liberia, this article adds to the growing literature on mobile communication in the Global South. By doing so, the study responds to scholarly criticisms of the assumption that young people everywhere experience the use of the mobile phone in similar ways. Based on qualitative semi-structured interviews with 38 Liberian teenagers, our findings challenge the WEIRD-centric suggestion of a worldwide 'monoculture', as our results show that although mobile connectivity affords Liberian teens similar opportunities as those afforded to their peers in most WEIRD (and non-WEIRD) societies, it is simultaneously experienced markedly different by them. We therefore argue for a more "inclusive" conceptualization of the MYC concept.

Keywords: Mobile youth culture, Global South, mobile media, Liberia, South-Saharan Africa, teenagers, adolescents, mobile phone, smartphone, status, identity, belonging.

Introduction

Mobile phones are tremendously popular in Africa and particularly Sub-Saharan Africa (Ogone, 2020; Kanyam, Kostandini & Ferreira, 2017; Porter et al., 2015), bringing with them significant economic and social change across the region (Kanyam, Kostandini & Ferreira, 2017). Economically, the Global System for Mobile Communications (GSMA) reported in 2021 that the mobile ecosystem, comprised of mobile technologies and services, contributed 8% of GDP in Sub-Saharan Africa and created over 3 million jobs. On the social side, mobile technology serves as a lifeline for society by enabling and supporting social interactions. For instance, mobile phones are reshaping the everyday social routines of Sub-Saharan Africans (Porter et al., 2020), changing the way they establish and maintain friendships, and influencing behaviors in intimate relationships (Porter, 2015).

The region's population of teenagers, who make up a huge portion of the population, occupy a central role in these changes (World Population Prospects, 2019). Compared to adults, African teenagers are found to be far heavier users of mobile technology (Archambault, 2011; Porter et al., 2015). They increasingly use their mobile devices to socialize, connect with family, mobilize resources, and access entertainment (Porter et al., 2012). However, African teenagers' mobile phone practices have sparked growing concerns among adults (e.g., parents, teachers). These concerns resemble in many ways a techno-panic (cf. Bond, 2010) – visible in widespread discourses regarding youths' assumed 'problematic' mobile media behavior (Porter, et al., 2016). While such discourses may reflect - to some extent warranted – adult concerns over how mobile technology contributing to the erosion of traditional family life, societal values and norms (cf. Wasserman, 2011), an overly strong focus on this issue can lead adults to overlook the very opportunities and challenges that mobile media brings to youths in Africa. Grasping the pivotal role of African youths' mobile

media practices within cultural change, warrants first and foremost empirical evidence on how their mobile youth culture (Vanden Abeele, 2016) takes shape.

Today, the literature on the mobile youth culture of teenagers living in WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic; Henrich et al., 2010) nations, also referred to as the Global North, is extant. In order to advance our knowledge of how mobile media shape and are shaped by youths' everyday lives, however, it is important to include contexts *beyond* the Global North. A growing body of research on the local embedding of the mobile phone in Global South contexts illustrates that mobile youth cultures intersect with social, cultural, economic and political structures (e.g. Donald et al., 2010; Kibere, 2016; Lingam, 2020; Banaji & Moreno-Almeida, 2020; Wallis, 2011) Nonetheless, how African – and in particular Liberian – young people use mobile phones, and how their practices are embedded in their local socio-cultural context, remains underexplored. This is unfortunate as the dominance of Western-centric perspectives within the mobile youth culture scholarship hinders a contextualized understanding of how the mobile phone contributes to rapid cultural and social transitions in Sub-Saharan African societies.

Thus, this study aims to contribute to the literature on mobile youth culture by exploring how youths in Liberia, a country in one the poorest and most culturally diverse regions in Africa, appropriate mobile phones and how their appropriations are embedded within the broader socio-cultural context of Liberian society. Drawing from in-depth interviews with 38 Liberian teenagers, we scrutinize what mobile ownership means to them and how phone use satisfies the needs peculiar to their age group. Before elaborating on the results of our interview study, however, we first provide some general information on teen life in Liberia and discuss the mobile youth culture framework against which we situate the results.

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A growing body of research illustrate the importance of also including contexts *beyond* the Global North in order to advance our knowledge of how mobile media technologies shape and are shaped by youths' everyday lives (e.g. Donald et al., 2010; Kibere, 2016; Lingam, 2020; Banaji & Moreno-Almeida, 2020; Wallis, 2011). Kibere's (2016) ethnography among young Kenyan slum residents, for example, shows that mobile phone practices can only be understood when considering their local embedding with a society's larger socio-cultural ecosystem. While the mobile youth culture of young people around the globe may share similar characteristics (e.g. appropriating the phone for strengthening peer networks), its local expressions intersect with social, cultural, economic and political factors beyond the technological affordances of mobile media (cfr. Banaji & Moreno-Almeida, 2020). The differences with the Global North observed in these studies point towards the importance of further exploration of the local embedding of the mobile phone in societies that are underrepresented in the dominant scholarship. How African – and in particular Liberian – young people use mobile phones, and how their practices are embedded in their local socio-cultural context, remains in particular underexplored. This is unfortunate as the dominance of Western-centric perspectives within the mobile youth culture scholarship hinders a contextualized understanding of how the mobile phone contributes to rapid cultural and social transitions in Sub-Saharan African societies.

Theoretical framework

Teen life in Liberia

Liberia is a small country situated on the western coast of Africa. It is the continent's oldest republic, established in 1847 by freed U.S. slaves. A civil war that started in 1989 lasted nearly two decades and left most of the country's population in poverty. Nearly half of Liberia's population (49.1%) is younger than 18 years (Lawin et al., 2018). Due to the ensuing difficult economy and poverty, most of the country's youth cannot go to school, and most of the ones who manage to enter school are unlikely to enter tertiary education (Mel et al., 2013). To make matters worse, lack of employment opportunities make it difficult for most young people in Liberia to become self-sufficient and independent (Mel et al., 2013). This leaves most of the country's youths – even up to 35 years – still living in family homes or with their parents, and dependent on family support to survive (cf. Goggin & Crawford, 2011).

Similar to other African regions, socio-cultural discourses on age, and the limited opportunities to become – financially – independent in Liberia, subjects young people to an involuntarily and prolonged liminal state of youth (cfr. Honwana, 2012). Consequently, young people typically occupy a subordinate position in family hierarchies in which they are expected to respect and obey elders and their domestic norms (Mbito, 2004; Porter, 2012). These norms, which encompass every aspect of teen life, empower parents to strictly regulate young Liberians' socialization, entertainment, and physical mobility (i.e., when and where teens go), and may even dictate on what contents (e.g., books, movies, music) teens get exposed to. These restrictions are especially stronger for girls compared to boys, as concerns over teenage or unintended pregnancy, which is prevalent among school-going teenage girls in Liberia (cf. Kimemia & Mugambi, 2016), prompts parents to impose tougher restrictions on the mobility and association of teenage girls.

Against this context, the mobile phone may hold the potential to ease some of the socio-cultural restrictions that Liberian youths face, as it opens up possibilities to autonomously navigate the social reality (cf. Bond, 2010; Vanden Abeele, 2016a). Simultaneously, however, similar to young individuals living in other developing societies (e.g., Kibere, 2016), mobile phones may confront Liberian youths with new challenges. Looking into Liberian teens' mobile media practices and how they shed light on the local embedding of mobile youth culture in Liberia is thus important, as it allows to consider the socio-economic and cultural realities in which these teens live in a rapidly digitizing societies. This study responds to this call by amplifying the voices of Liberian Teenagers over how they perceive and appropriate the mobile phone within their socio-cultural contexts.

Mobile youth culture in Liberia

Mobile Youth Culture refers to how young people use mobile media in unique ways that support and enhance their everyday lives (Vanden Abeele, 2016a). For example, young people have widely embraced mobile phones (Campbell & Park, 2008), and have developed distinctive practices to establish, maintain, and reinforce social connections (e.g., Donald et al., 2010; Ling 2004; Taylor & Harper, 2001). Also, the mobile phone supports youths to pursue their personal aspirations and identifications relatively autonomously from authority figures (Ling & Ytrri 1999, 2006). According to mobile youth culture theory, this illustrates the central role of mobile technology in young people's transitions from childhood to adulthood (Vanden Abeele, 2016a).

Although the concept of Mobile Youth Culture offers a useful lens to understand teens' mobile media practices, it is criticized for being rather Eurocentric (e.g., Castells et al., 2007; Goggin & Crawford, 2011; Ling & Bertel, 2007; Vanden Abeele, 2014). Specifically, Mobile Youth Culture theory risks misrepresenting young people's practices as a

monoculture by perpetuating the assumption that youths across cultures share similar experiences when growing up (Vanden Abeele, 2016b). The risk of misrepresentation is especially valid because most empirical studies in this tradition involve white and middle-class youths in Western societies (Goggin & Crawford, 2011). Consequently, the scholarship tends to overlook how the heterogeneous realities of youth shape the local embeddedness of mobile media practices (De Leyn, et al., 2022).

In sum, we argue that there is both theoretical and empirical value to examine how mobile youth culture manifests in contexts different from those in the Global North, such as in Sub-Sahara Liberia. By doing so, we aim to contribute to a growing field of mobile media studies that explore the local embeddedness of the mobile phone in societies beyond the Global North (e.g. Donald et al., 2010; Kibere, 2016; Lingam, 2020; Banaji & Moreno-Almeida, 2020; Wallis, 2011) In a culture such as Liberia, where young people live under extreme and limiting socio-economic circumstances, mobile phones may be potent instruments in the hands of young people. They may offer young people virtual mobility, may give young people quick access to information and contents, and may facilitate micro-coordination (Porter et al., 2012). Simultaneously, however, they may bring new challenges to the lives of young people, if only through the new dependencies they create on the technology for getting by in everyday life (Kibere, 2016).

Based on the foregoing, this study aims to find out whether the local embedding of mobile phones among youths in Liberia reveals a mobile youth culture that is specific to opportunities and challenges that Liberian youths face in this modernizing society (RQ1). While doing so, we also pay attention to the possibility of subcultures within this mobile youth Culture and how these may be further grounded in meaningful differences between young persons living in Liberia.

Method

Sample and Data Collection Procedure

To address the research questions of this study, 38 semi-structured interviews with Liberian teenagers were conducted between July and September 2021. Participants (N = 16 males; N = 21 females) were teenagers between the ages of 15 and 22 years and were students from private[1] and public[2] schools in the Capital city of Monrovia and its suburbs.

In this study, we use the term 'teenagers' to refer to children between approximately 13 and 25 years. This is because in Liberia, the social demarcation of the adolescent life stage is somewhat different than in the Global North (cf. Goggin & Crawford, 2011). For example, it is common practice in Liberia to see children up to 25 years to still live with parents. Consequently, children in this age category (20-25 years) and staying with parents often face the same experience as younger teenagers (13-19 years) with regards to control and monitoring by parents.

We obtained informed consent and parental consent for all participants. We also obtained Ethical clearance from the Research Ethics and Data management Committee (REDC) of [blinded for review] on April 12, 2021, and from the Institutional Review Board of the University of Liberia (ULIRB) on June 14, 2021.

Sampling and Procedure

From a list of schools in Monrovia and its surroundings, we selected schools using convenience sampling following which we asked for permission from school authorities to recruit students for the study. We were then escorted to classrooms by school authorities to

[1] Private schools here are schools with relatively high tuitions usually affordable by middle to high-income families or families with high socioeconomic status.
[2] Public schools here are not necessarily government-owned, but community schools with relatively low academic tuition fees targeting children of low-income families or families with low socioeconomic status.

explain the study's purpose. We then asked for volunteers and students who volunteered to participate in the study received additional briefing and were allowed to ask questions regarding their participation. We obtained parental consent following which dates and venues for interviews were decided, based on participants' preferences. Participants were interviewed alone to ensure confidentiality and to embolden participants to talk. Some participants opted for a (semi-) public setting, such as on the porch of their homes or in the open yard. To be selected, participants had to own a mobile phone (i.e., smartphone or button phone) and had to be between 13 and 25 years.

Interview guide and procedure for analysis.

A semi-structured interview guide was prepared in advance. Interview questions were open-ended to allow respondents to provide their own answers to questions (Barbie, 2016; Reja et al., 2003). Interviews lasted between 40 and 50 minutes. We transcribed and coded manually using a partial transcript approach by transcribing important sections of the audio interviews (Arksey & Knight, 1999).

Following the conceptual foundations of the mobile youth culture concept, the interview guide explored themes in relation to how mobile phones support identity formation/expression, autonomy and relatedness. In addition, the interviews asked about domestic norms surrounding phone use (e.g., Whether there are written/implied rules regarding phone use and whether the interviewed youths worry about using their phones when at home with their parents). Sub-themes of the interview guide tapped further into specific issues in relation to identity, autonomy and relatedness, such as the phone's role in providing status and leveraging popularity (e.g., How status is attached to mobile phone ownership, and whether 'brand' matters; whether mobile phone ownership influenced friendship formation) and its role in relationship maintenance. Based on mobile youth culture

theory, we generated a first set of higher-order codes that were used to bring initial structure to the transcribed data. As we coded further, subcodes emerged (e.g., 'gathering information and knowledge') during an iterative coding process.

Below, we present the results of our thematic analysis. Quotes are presented in their pidgin or colloquial forms as spoken by respondents during the interviews. Even though standard English is widely spoken in Liberia, Pidgin or colloquial English – a Liberian or in-group version of the standard English – is common especially when interactants are Liberians. To maintain anonymity, we use pseudonyms instead of participants' real names.

Results

Our analysis of the interviews revealed that the opportunities and challenges related to the 'modernization' of Liberian society manifest themselves in the mobile youth culture of Liberian teens. In particular, our findings show that the uses and understandings of mobile media by Liberian teenagers cannot be separated from their lived realities as citizens in a one of the poorest nations of the world: Against a context of financial hardship, the phone takes on special meaning as a resource that can be leveraged to develop a better life and that allows teenagers to circumvent constraints upon freedom stemming from traditional domestic norms. At the same time, however, phones, and the various ways in which they are used and understood, also reproduce the precarity and constraints that certain groups of teenagers face. Especially for poorer and female teenagers, mobile phones are a double-edged sword. Below, we highlight the three dominant themes that reflect the dualities that phones bring: The use of the phone for resource mobilization, to socialize, and as a status marker.

Resource mobilization

Prior research in the Global South already highlighted that mobile phones grant teenagers opportunities to participate in a society in which computers are fairly rare, making learning and teaching difficult (Palumbo, 2014). This was also the case for the Liberian teenagers that we interviewed: As Liberia struggles to regain its footing after nearly two decades of war, most children are eager to go to school to better their chances of a better future. For example, 21-year-old Jebbeh expressed her eagerness to attend school to "*acquire knowledge and to be able to help my big sister to take care of my mom*", while Siah (21 years) believes going to school will make her *"not to suffer in the future"*. The mobile phone was especially important to these and other interviewed teens due to the unavailability of textbooks and computers. As such, the mobile phone is the closest thing to a computer for many. As Liberian teenagers strive to get quality education, they expressed strong appreciation for mobile phones as tools that enhance their education. The following comments from teenagers illustrate this:

"Phone is important to me because if my teacher happens to give me an assignment, I use my phone to browse on the internet" [**Jebbeh: 21-year-old female**].

"If you in the class and teacher give you assignment you not get the book to take it from you can use the internet" ***[Emma: 19-year-old female].***

In light of this, the teens in this study expressed that mobile phones are essential for resource mobilization. They reported to extensively make use of the 'perpetual contact' afforded by mobile media to seek support from peers when faced with difficult assignments. Fourteen-year-old Moses, for instance, told us that the ability to connect with peers without 'being physical' together is instrumental to efficiently meet educational demands: *"If I have assignment to do and I don't understand it I can call them [friends], maybe they will make me understand."* Next to opportunities for collaborative learning, we also observed how Liberian teenagers appropriate mobile communication to harness resources to support their education

and to find livelihood support, using mobile money services[3] (MTN and Orange Money for Liberia):

*"When I use my telephone and someone call me, I can ask them for money to help me with my school and my other stuff that I need in my school" [**Massa**: 21-year-old female].*

*"When I want something from her [Aunt], I can easily take my phone and call her and she will send it on my mobile money" [**Mechen: 15-year-old female**].*

However, an associated constraint which limits the experience of the mobile phone's potential for Liberian teenagers is access to internet, a feature that enhances the mobile phone experience. While the anyplace and anytime connectivity afforded by mobile is thus perceived as paramount to mobilizing resources, the socio-economic constraints complicate Liberian youths' abilities to maintain this ubiquitous connectivity, especially for those who face greater poverty.

The absence of internet in most homes, schools, and in public areas means having to provide internet for oneself, something most teenagers cannot afford due to the harsh economic reality. Mobile phones enable teenagers to circumvent this challenge to some extent though, through the use of new-generation file-sharing technologies such as Xender[4] and SHAREit[5], which do not require internet connection to share and exchange digital contents such as documents, trending music, (TikTok) videos, movies, pictures, and games

[3] The use of mobile phones to remotely access (banking)services which are typically provided over the counter (Mothobi & Grzybowski, 2017). Remittances are sent directly to requesters' phones using personal mobile money accounts. Funds transferred can then be cashed-out at mobile money kiosks found nearly everywhere in street corners. In Liberia, LoneStar Cell MTN Mobile Money and ORANGE Orange Money.

[4] Xender is a file-sharing technology that does not require internet connectivity. Typically, however, it uses Wi-Fi (without internet) to send files to other devices that must also have the app installed and are connected to the same Wi-Fi network.

[5] SHAREit is a peer-to-peer file sharing, content streaming and gaming platform that supports online and offline sharing of files and contents (Source: SHAREit).

with each other. As evident in our conversation with Arthur, Liberian teenagers employ such strategies to circumvent limited mobile connectivity:

"We share it [digital contents] through Xender because Bluetooth is not existing to we, the young people. Only the elders are still using it. They [Xender] are much faster than Bluetooth and with Xender you can transfer to more than one person at the same time" [**Arthur: 18-year-old male**].

Moreover, our participants reported that they use the 'free basic' services feature provided by Facebook (now Meta) to connect with peers. This service allows users to message each other without paid internet connection as long as they remain within the Facebook ecosystem – even though they cannot access pictures, videos and audios. These strategies, however, are indicative of new dependencies that these teenagers develop, in this case on the 'benevolent capitalism' of moguls in the big tech industry.

Given that the socio-economic constraints Liberian teenagers live through make it difficult to fulfill their need for self-actualization, esteem, and socialization in their everyday life, the importance of the mobile phone to achieve such purposes is highlighted, resulting in great practical and socio-emotional dependence on mobile media. From our interviews with teens, it became clear that the mobile phone plays an essential role in helping Liberian teenagers navigate their everyday livelihood. This is shown in the following quotes from three teenagers:

"My phone is very, very, important to me. If my phone go off just for a day, I'm not a human for that day" **[Ezekiel: 18-year-old male].**

"I believe when my mom move from near me and my dad move from near me, and they go spend time for 1000 years, so long the phone always in my hand, I can't think on them" **[Arthur: 18-year-old male]**.

"A day spent without my phone; I can feel sick". **[Emma: 19-year-old female]**.

How mobile phone supports Liberian teenagers' social autonomy

Unlike teenagers in the Global North (e.g., Haddon, 2012; Ito et al., 2010; Williams & Williams, 2005), the socio-cultural structure in which Liberian teenagers live limits their autonomy to pursue personal interests, including their interests in socialization. Specifically, the everyday life of Liberian teens is very different than that of the average teenager living in the Global North: For example, besides traveling daily to school, Liberian teens must perform multiple domestic tasks daily, including house-cleaning, cooking (especially girls), fetching water from wells or public (hand)pumps and doing manual laundry. This reality, according to teens, places physical constraints on teens' socialization. Consequently, we found how mobile phones play a paramount role in the everyday lives of Liberian teens who stated using their mobile phones to gain autonomy and to steer their own relationships with peers outside the sphere of control and influence of parents or other adults: This is illustrated in the following interviews:

"What I need to do they (parents) don't want me to do it, (but) I will [be]able to do it, through that phone. Without them [parents] knowing." [**Edith: 17-year-old female**].

"*Now I can make friends with whoever I want to make friends with because at first, my mom used to restrict my friend* [**Irene: 18-year-old female**].

"Mobile phone has made it easier that you don't have to leave your house. You can be here or there or anywhere and make friends" **[Mamu: 18-year-old male]**.

There is meaningful heterogeneity in how Liberian teens use their smartphone, however, especially in relation to gender. For example, when it comes to establishing and maintaining romantic relationship, the opportunity to do so through mediated communication – an affordance of mobile phones – seems to be working well for Liberian teenagers howbeit differently for girls and boys. For girls wishing to experiment with their sexuality, because they face stronger parental restrictions compared to boys, the mobile phone is a perfect tool

that enables virtual boundary crossing using video calls and texts with boys, leaving little worries about pregnancy or getting caught by vigilant parents:

"Especially for the opposite gender, you don't have to go to the house because sometimes it's risky for you and the opposite gender to be in the same place, because the devil is busy. So, your can talk online, your see each other faces, your have fun. [**Jestina: 16-year-old female**].

"*If I have a phone and you have yours we can like communicate. You don't have to come to my house, I don't have to go to your house*" [**Bendu: 18-year-old female**].

On the other hand, timid teenage boys view mobile phone as a potent tool through which (i.e., mediated means such as calling or texting) they can woo girls into romantic relationship. This way, they circumvent any possibility of embarrassment in the presence of peers in the event the request is turned downed:

"When you want you see girl passing like that girl coming [pointing to a teen girl passing by], *maybe sometime I may want her [for romantic relationship], but I will be shy to talk it. I will only ask her say oh give me your number"* [**Ezekiel: 18-year-old Male**].

Our conversations with Liberian teenagers show evidence of mobile youth practice among Liberian teenagers especially as they attempt to gain autonomy from parents during an important developmental phase of their lives – the period between childhood to adult, when the desire to bond and find belongingness with peers is intense. We find evidence of the mobile phone serving as an important link between Liberian teens and their peers. Finally, our findings demonstrate how mobile phones are aiding teenagers who not only view and use the technology to communicate messages, but also as expressive symbols through which they negotiate their values, tastes, and place in the peer group.

Mobile phones as status symbols

In mobile youth culture, mobile phones are not just communication devices. Mobile phones are also symbolic extensions of the self that communicate the owner's values (Katz & Sugiyama, 2006; Srivastava, 2005), reflect access to financial resources, and express individual and collective identities (Vanden Abeele, 2016a; Williams & Williams, 2005). In similar fashion to teenagers in the Global North, our results show how Liberian teenagers view mobile phones as personalized fashion objects, attaching importance to design and aesthetics (e.g., casings, personalized ring tones). Liberian teenagers pay special attention to device quality or type. Specifically, Liberian teenagers are drawn to the iPhone because of its aesthetic beauty, camera quality, storage capacity etc., making iPhones the popular brand among Liberian teenagers – many of whom own cheap Chinese brands that flood the Liberia phone market:

"iPhone is their [young people] God…they worship the phone [iPhone] so much", they behave like the phone [iPhone] is more than their life" [**Helena: 20-year-old female**].

"Everyone wants to have iPhone because normally we [teenagers] want clear pictures and (also)because the capacity is really- really built up" [**Mary: 18-year-old female**].

Liberian teenagers also view mobile phones as status symbols or markers (cf. Campbell, 2005; Katz & Sugiyama, 2006; Srivastava, 2005) signaling independence from parents (cf. Srivastava, 2005; Campbell, 2005), as well as economic and social status. From our interviews, for example, Liberian teenagers who hold iPhones are perceived as affluent and belonging to upper class families. Therefore, owning an iPhone in Liberia as a teenager gives one a form of celebrity status within the peer group as illustrated in the following quotes from our interviews with three teenagers:

"They [iPhone owners] using phone that costs 700 [i.e. United States Dollars], *we know their parents are financially strong"* [**Jacob: 21-year-old Male**].

"If you have iPhone, many people can want to go to your house everyday" [**Maybel: 17-year-old Female**].

"Once you have iPhone you are [considered] big boy or big girl" [**Arthur: 18-year-old male**].

"My friends give me lot of respect when they see the iPhone in my hand" [**Irene: 18-year-old Female**].

Our interviews reveal that the harsh economic reality in Liberia prevents most teenagers from enjoying the status elevation that result from owning a smartphone device, especially an expensive device such as an iPhone. For example, unlike their peers who own some sort of smartphone with features that enable enhanced distant interpersonal socialization, Liberian teenagers who, because of their precarious economic state, cannot afford a smartphone – or just any phone - feel marginalized because they are unable to stretch their socializations beyond their geographical constraints nor enjoy the educational enhancement opportunities of mobile phone (i.e., smartphone). The following quotes from two teenagers illustrate this:

"I feel bad, because when my friends have phones [referring to smartphones] *that they can do things on and I don't have" [***Massa: 21-year-old female].**

"But using this kind of phone [referring to a simple button phone] *at this kind of age you know it's kinda hard for me" [***Morris: 17-year-old male].**

Furthermore, in the Liberian mobile youth culture, friendships are formed around the type of phone one has (i.e., smartphones versus simple phones). In other words, the quality of mobile phones defines group formation and membership - a practice one teenager described as 'button-phone-friends' and 'torch-screen-friends'. Put simply, sometimes as Liberian teens socialize, teens who possess button or simple phones often group together, while those with smartphones form their own group:

"The people that get the torch screen [i.e., smartphone] don't want to be bothered with the people that get button phones" [**Emma: 19-year-old female**].

"In my class, people associate themselves with people based on the quality of phone you have. So, everyone group themselves according to the type of phones they have" [**Irene: 18-year-old female**].

The mobile as status or marker symbol and the extent to which it determines entry into the peer-group has social consequences for low-SES teenagers who cannot afford iPhones or brands perceived as high quality. That is, as teenagers in possession of popular brands such as iPhones gain more attention and attract more friends, the self-esteem of those who cannot afford expensive brands suffers as they face rejection and alienation within the friend groups:

"When we're sitting together [and] when my button phone ring, they [those holding expensive brands] will always say oh mehn move from here mehn" [**Barcon: 18-year-old Male**].

"I feel honestly bad using this phone [button phone] but I just have to" [**Morris: 17-year-old Male**].

"When I see people bringing so, so, big-big phones [high-quality brands], when they ask me, you get phone I can say no, because it looking shameful" [**Ezekiel: 18-year-old Male**].

The above findings show that, although similar to what is practiced in the Global North, in Liberian mobile youth culture the distinction between button phones and smartphones is more expressed in Liberia among teenagers as financial hardship makes smartphone ownership a privilege. The phone one owns, can thus be used to negotiate social and economic status among peers, and becomes reflective of the existence of different youth subcultures that form around differences in affluence.

Discussion

Though the literature regarding mobile phone use among young people beyond the Global North has grown substantially over the past decade, Sub-Saharan Africa, and especially Liberia, with its rich ethnic and cultural diversity, and where poverty is highest, remains an understudied region when compared to other areas in the world. This is unfortunate, given that despite these realities, mobile phone uptake – especially among young people – is widespread and impactful.

This study set out to explore the embedding of mobile phones among young people in Liberia to uncover whether there is a mobile youth culture specific to the opportunities and challenges that Liberian youths face in a country undergoing modernization. Drawing from semi-structured interviews with 38 Liberian teens, we found that mobile phones occupy a central role in the everyday lives of young Liberians. As such, our findings provide additional evidence for the main assumption of MYC, namely that young people across the globe experience, to some degree, similar developmental processes which result in distinctive mobile media practices that support identity negotiation, autonomy and belongingness (Vanden Abeele, 2016).

However, our results illustrate that differences in the socio-economic and cultural context between Liberia and countries in the Global North as well as in the Global South result in considerable heterogeneous expressions of mobile youth culture (cf. Goggin & Crawford, 2021; Wallis, 2011). Foremost, our findings show that economic constraints lead to particular meanings and uses of mobile phones among Liberian teens: Phones are directly used to mobilize financial resources, with mobile payments contributing to teenagers' educational careers, and thus their chances for upward mobility. But because many Liberian teenagers cannot afford to access the internet due to high data costs and lack of free wireless internet connections, the interviewed teens revealed employing circumventing strategies that

allow them to connect with peers and access digital files. Economic constraints also imply that the mobile phone is a standard of evaluation among peers for most Liberian teenagers – many of whom are from poor families. For them, holding certain brands (e.g., iPhone) can compensate for or disguise one's low social status and help them earn one a central place within the peer group. As such, it becomes clear that also within Liberia, there are differences between young people in relation to the financial hardships they are confronted with, that manifest in how much they can capitalize on the opportunities – or become subjected to the constraints – that mobile media pose. These differences in economic resources thus give way to different youth subcultures.

Similarly, most Liberian teens take advantage of the anytime-anyplace connectivity (Castells, 2010; Castells et al., 2007) that mobile phones afford, to socialize from any location at any time. This way, they can overcome mobility restrictions imposed by wary parents. In doing so, similar to teens living in WEIRD societies, the interviewed Liberian teenagers expressed a strong desire for self-determined actions: The desire for perpetual contact and for peer association and bonding (Vanden Abeele, 2016). After all, as they struggle to gain autonomy to pursue self-socialization goals, they find support from mobile technology which provides them with countless opportunities and possibilities to navigate through the socio-economic constraints they face. Here again, however, stark gender differences are noticeable, with girls understanding and using mobile media in different ways to their male counterparts, while also being differently surveilled in their use by their parents and other authority figures. As such, not only one's access to financial resources, but also gender, forms a social factor that demarcates different mobile youth subcultures.

On a theoretical level, the findings of this study highlight the importance of considering different contexts which, as our study confirms, can lead to differential uses of mobile phones. For example, our findings challenge the WEIRD-centric notion in the

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literature that mobile phones almost naturally result in anytime-anyplace connectivity for the owners. On the contrary, our results show that this kind of connectivity is experienced differently by Liberian youths. Thus, our study confirms the theoretical shortcoming of the MYC concept (see also Goggin and Crawford, 2011; Haddon, 2007; Vanden Abeele, 2016a): Specifically, when studying mobile youth culture, the heterogeneous realities of teens have been less explored. We therefore recommend the formulation of a more 'inclusive' conceptualization of anytime anyplace connectivity, one that takes into consideration the impact of culture on the usage of mobile phone technology and understands localized manifestations of its affordances. As we demonstrated from our results, the lived experiences of individuals – in our case, teenagers – can indeed determine how they think about mobile phones and what specific practices they perform in response to their conditions.

With mobile phone ownership among teenagers now increasing in Liberia, the findings of our study hold practical relevance for parents and those working with families and children Liberia, as they can be used as an evidence-base from which conversations, interventions and campaigns regarding proper media use can be started. An open discussion approach, which involves helping and guiding children in their media use, according to Sasson and Mesch (2014) and Shin and Lwin (2017), can help lead to mutual understanding of the benefits and opportunities of mobile phones.

Although results of our study – one of the first to study mobile youth culture in Sub-Saharan Africa– show the existence of mobile youth culture in Liberia, the results here should be interpreted with caution for four reasons: Participants were drawn from the (sub-)urban capital of Monrovia where the socio-economic context is different from what teens living in rural areas experience. In rural areas in particular, many children still do not participate in any form of schooling at all. This may result in an entirely different lived reality, that may also have an impact on the existence of a mobile youth culture in these areas

Second, though participants were recruited from the (sub-)urban capital of Monrovia, they were drawn from mostly low-income families who live on the economic margins. Consequently, they may have differential experiences from what their peers from high-income families have. In other words, there may be further heterogeneity in mobile phone practices as a result of teens' economic status than what has been explored and revealed in this article. Third, sub-Saharan Africa is a multi-ethnic region with diversities in cultural practices (Nyambegera, 2002; Sweetland, et al., 2014). Therefore, we argue that studying mobile youth culture in these different contexts is needed to fully capture trends within mobile youth culture in sub-Saharan Africa. Finally, the results are based on interviews with 38 teenagers, giving need to caution with respect to generalization altogether.

In sum, the results presented in this study show the mobile youth culture(s) of Liberian youths, telling a tale of both opportunities and challenges in a rapidly modernizing society in one of the poorest regions of the world. The analysis of these opportunities and challenges raises further questions about how these mobile youth cultures may (re-)produce and challenge the traditional culture and domestic norms of Liberia. Future research is needed to examine this issue further, for example through an analysis of parental mediation of mobile media use, teens' perceptions of parental mediation (e.g., setting rules and controlling media use), and how young people respond to attempts by parents to monitor and control their social activities and mobile phone usage. Such research can further advance our knowledge of how mobile media, and especially mobile youth cultures, are entwined in social and cultural change in Sub-Saharan Africa, and more generally, the world.

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