

Chapter 11

Developing the Leadership Potential of African Youth Through Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on the results of an explorative, qualitative study that investigated how online communities can facilitate civic engagement amongst Millennials. Based on the study's findings, the chapter explores how the use of online communities can assist and empower youth, particularly African young people, to overcome barriers, empower and foster civic engagement. This chapter begins with a review of key literature, and then a summary of the study methodology, followed by a discussion of the study findings and their potential for African youth. Results of the study indicated that five facilitating factors and two barriers were influential towards youth civic engagement in an online context. Adult perceptions of youth and the low credibility of online communities were found to act as significant barriers to online youth participation. Given these key findings from the study, the authors show how to employ online communities to engage African youth civic participation and decision making.

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INTRODUCTION

Natural resources and minerals in Africa are plentiful. The continent is a leading producer of the world's diamonds, platinum, cocoa, coffee and palm oil (Ayittey, 1992; Gordon, 2002). As such, Africa has significant potential as an economic driver due to its resources and dynamic workforce (African Development Bank, 2014). To this end, youth form a significant part of the population, with 50 per cent of Africa's population under the age of 25 (Filmer & Fox, 2014). Yet, Porter, Hampshire, Mashiri, et al. (2010) assert that African youth are frequently marginalized. They do not meaningfully participate in economic or political activities. Not only are African youth marginalized, but they also face significant challenges (O'Brien, 1996). They face radicalisation, and recruitment into violent extremist groups such as the Al-Shabaab (Villa-Vicencio, Buchanan-Clarke & Humphrey, 2016). It is, therefore, recognised that African youth need to be engaged in a meaningful ways if the continent is to have holistic development (Hope, 2012). Notwithstanding the current situation of African youth presents a hindrance to the future development of the continent.

There is evidence that resources are present and potential remains great for Africa. However, harnessing the continent's resources and workforce becomes the next vital step, in particular the implementation of sound leadership is a significant part of Africa's economic and social development. Part of achieving effective and sustainable leadership requires presenting African youth with leadership development opportunities in the form of civic engagement and social participation. Mutuku (2011) believes that part of poverty reduction and sustainable development in Africa hinges on the effective participation of youth. Such participation ascertains that young people have adequate skills for future decision-making and ensures the future development of African nations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Youth Development and Civic Engagement

Youth development research identifies adolescence as an influential and timely period. It is at this stage that young people begin to develop social consciousness. Youniss, McLellan & Yates (1997) describe this process as the formation of a civic life, which includes envisioning oneself as an active participant in civic matters. Social participation traits and civic identity are developed during adolescence, yet it is believed that present day youth are disconnected from civic and political participation (Bachen, Raphael, Lynn, McKee & Philippi, 2008; Carpinì, 2000;

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