Youth Learning Opportunities and Digital Trends in Uganda

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Abstract

This study explores learning trends (formally and informally) as supported by digitalisation among the youth in Uganda. Over the years digitilisation has been incremental, and so has been a growing recruitment, exploration and encirclement towards the digital platforms as a medium of information delivery. The young people who are akin with these technologies have been brought together. The youth being the largest population in the country and naturally the most users of digital platforms, this has changed learning opportunities amongst this age bracket. The main objective of the study was to investigate the new trends of digital education among the youth in Uganda. The research design was a descriptive cross-sectional survey. The sample size consisted of 369 Ugandan youth. Simple random sampling was used to select various regions of the country, and systematic sampling was used to select respondents from the various strata. The link to the Google form was sent via email and WhatsApp Messenger to facilitate online sampling. The responses were coded, entered into IBM SPSS 26, and analysed to produce demographic and descriptive characteristics of the sample. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to establish the relationship between variables, and linear regression was used to determine the effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The findings show that learning technologies, such as print-material, radio, television, video, audio, mobile, computers, and the internet, offer a solution not only for resuming education where it has been disrupted, but also for overcoming geographical access and rigidity in traditional education. The study recommends that there is need for macro-based investments that will enhance increased digital learning.

Keywords: Youth, Digital Platforms, Formal/Non-formal Learning Opportunities

INTRODUCTION

In the period before the 1990's, learning was mainly supported by tertiary institutions. The learning activities were biased towards the structured conventional face to face learning. While the period after the 1990s to date, the Ugandan youth have increasingly been involved in a number of learning and self-educative activities regardless of their education background or economic status. It was noted that digitalization is the most trending term in the modern learning era. In Uganda, the definition of youth is within the age range of 15 and 30 (UBOS, 2012). Youth have been supported by government to be agile in society through involvement in decision making on issues that affects them. This hoisting of the youth voices is to increase awareness on youth issues and enhance the ability to impact the community positively. This has been critical given that the youth growth rate is one of the highest in the world. In addition, Uganda's 2014 census reported that 78% of the population is below 30 years old (UBOS, 2014). Over the years studies suggest that young people may take up different actions and or common values viewed as the best for future generations (Lawson et al., 2019).

Statement of the Problem

Due to COVID-19, some schools and colleges were closed. Face-to-face education halted in schools, universities, and colleges. The Ministry of Education and Sports was required to investigate alternate options. This shutdown increased digital-based teaching activities in an effort to minimise learning disruptions (Sharma et al, 2022). Youth were instructed to reconsider how to relearn and operate with digital platforms in both the formal and informal sectors. This includes access to class, new skills on how to conduct business as a way to be better equipped to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. In the informal sector the youth largely took on social sites like Whatsapp to uptake online business opportunities and showcase their products, while in the formal sector software platforms like Zoom and Microsoft teams were largely embraced. As such this paper explores the new trends of digital education in Uganda. The study focus was to identify the factors that would enable this new learning dimension among the youth and the possible impact this would have on the future of learning in Uganda.

The research questions of this study were;

i. What are the current trends in digital education in Uganda?
ii. What are the enabling factors for digital platforms that enhance youth learning in Uganda?
iii. What is the impact of digital platforms on the learning activities of the youth in Uganda?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital Trends

Doe (2018) describes learning as the acquisition of new or existing information. E-learning is one method of "doing" the human requirement of education (Niavanda & Niavanda, 2012). Technology that allows students control over time, place, path, and/or pace facilitates digital learning (Kumar Basak et al., 2018; Archambault et al., 2022).

Digital learning enables students to study from any location, at any time, while saving money, having flexibility, and saving time (Nagrale, 2017; Bijeesh, 2017). Utilizing electronic devices (TV, computers, laptops, smartphones, etc.) with supporting technologies in synchronous or asynchronous situations constitutes digital learning (Mpirirwe et al. 2021). As such, digital platforms are able to provide students with easy-to-access information, accelerated learning and enables students to deepen their understanding of concepts that would have been difficult to understand (Brown, 2020). These can be explained through video based learning and virtual reality platforms among others.

Virtual Training

Since the epidemic, virtual training has been a big trend that is likely to continue. Virtual reality is comprised of output devices (vision, hearing, tactile, and power transmitter), input devices (mouse, chaser, etc.), a graphical production system, and an information programme. Initially, many questioned its practicality and success. Pandemic interruptions pushed businesses to implement virtual classroom training. This has achieved success, albeit with a few restrictions. Virtual learning necessitates distinct abilities and strategies (Vivek & Bhattacharjee, 2021). These include shorter learning times and remote-working digital platforms. With live interactions, ready-to-use tools, surveys, and more, virtual training is more adaptable than conventional classroom sessions. With virtual training, you can deliver examinations in real-time, collect instantaneous feedback, and conduct sessions with geographically distributed teams.

Video-based Learning
Video-based learning remains a popular way to convey important information. Students watch videos on TV, desktop, phone, and tablet (Martin, 2012). Students access digital libraries, email tutoring, and online courses from home.

Micro Learning
Microlearning platforms have grown in the last year and will continue to help learners access bite-sized learning. Microlearning platforms help students learn quickly and effectively. Examples include precise and focused microlearning videos, microlearning apps or mobile apps, and micro-challenges and games. In Uganda, the expectation to assess the learning trajectory of the student is a core strategy in the use of this platform.

Social and Collaborative Learning
In organizations, social learning is gaining relevance. Organizations are adopting social and collaborative learning in order to capitalise on their strengths. Collaborative learning comprises the use of forums, informal talks, sharing sessions, and learning circles in the workplace. Social and collaborative learning strategies are economical. Multiple platforms and tools now allow for effective and efficient social training. Open learning motivates students to seek out fresh information.

Enabling Factors for Digital Learning

Access to Devices and the Internet
Given that some learners may not have access to devices commonly used, these include television set, computer, laptop or mobile device to access e-learning activities at home, schools may have to deploy them. In instances where the providers are academic, connections to acceptable internet broadband may limit learners at home. This suggests that even if the learners have the gadgets, they may not be to use them.

Tailor Online Instruction to Student Needs and Abilities
Furthermore, it is vital to analyse the requirements of English language learners and students with impairments and make accommodations accordingly. Providers must address the implications of digital learning for varied types of learners. In addition to using learning management systems such as Google Classroom, there are alternative ways to deliver teaching, including emailing assignments, posting activities for lower-level grades on school websites, and sending home paper packets. This is to guarantee that online accommodations are provided to students with impairments.

Professional Development
Digital learning requires adequate competencies for those involved (Rienties et al., 2013). There is need to train the stakeholders in a way that encourages professional development. This can be done through Ministry based initiatives and learning providers, this could be in form of online help desk, technology vendors for training materials among other resources

Data Privacy and Security a Priority
This is a top priority for providers in order to safeguard their data. The prevalence of phishing, malware, and spyware may increase. All stakeholders should receive training on how to handle client information, strengthen email security, and improve cyber hygiene. Knowing what drives digital learning enables administrators, IT leaders, and staff to make more informed decisions for their programmes and provide all students with quality, accessible training.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a descriptive cross-sectional survey design on account of its rapid turnaround in data collection. The study population involved youth that had access to either radio, television or smart phone. According to Uganda National Household Survey 2016/17 Commissioned by the national bureau of information, about 3,770,000 Ugandan households had access to a digital gadget. Using the formular by Saunders, Lewis & Thornhill (2012), which states that the minimum sample be calculated specifically for research work. The "estimate" was 95% accurate. This corresponded to a z score of 1.96. The minimum margin of error was therefore 5%. In this research, the z score was used to estimate the proportions of accuracy and minimum margin of error as far as respondents were concerned.

The sample size comprised of 369 youth in Uganda who are fairly dispersed in terms of formal education attainment/non-attainment and geographical dispersion. The simple random sampling design was used in this investigation to select samples in the different regions in the country. The systematic sampling was then applied to selected respondents from the various strata. This design was chosen for this research because it gave each element in the population an equal chance of being included in the sample.

The Google form link was sent via email and WhatsApp Messenger for convenience sampling on online platforms. Participants were automatically directed to the survey when they clicked the link. The feedback was coded, entered into IBM SPSS 26, and analysed to generate demographic and descriptive sample characteristics. Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to establish the relationship between variables, and linear regression was used to determine how the independent variable affected the dependent variable. Secondary data was acquired from documentary review process mainly utilizing the Resource Centre at Ministry of ICT HQRS. Data triangulation was adopted.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What are the Current Trends in Digital Education in Uganda?

The use of Radio is widely spread and hence most commonly used to receive information in Uganda as guided by the Uganda Communication Commission there are 292 licensed FM radio stations in Uganda (Broadcasting and Telecommunications Market & Industry, Q2 Report, 2018). In addition, radios are decentralized which allows information flow to a particular region, this provides a good background to promote learning through a local dissemination strategy. Furthermore, learning material can be sent out using a live session or a recorded one which allows wider participation.

The use of the television is another trend being adopted today. By 2019, there were there are 39 operational television stations and seven (7) pay TV service providers (UCC, Q3 Report, 2019). Digital migration was completed in 2 phases in 2015, leading to more channels for viewers. Uganda's uneven resource distribution may explain the findings. Access to digital learning platforms is hindered by slow digital migration and low resource distribution. This means TV can't ensure learning equity. Owning a cell phone is rapidly becoming essential for acquiring information and resources. Given the high youth prevalence in the population, this has allowed increased use of mobile phones. The young populace is knowledgeable about new technologies. These come with an assortment of learning platforms and information that the youth can use to better themselves. In addition, mobile phones are more accessible than television sets. Furthermore, service providers have been innovative to come up with packages like the ‘MTN work from home data bundles’ that can be easily accessed by phone.

What are the Enabling Factors for Digital Platforms to Enhance Youth Learning in Uganda?

The enabling factors for digital platforms increase equity and access to education, the use of radio and television was enhanced by the government of Uganda. This was confirmed through regression which revealed that there was a linear relationship between digital platforms and youth learning [F (1, 309) =80.826, p<0.01]. This meant if there was a unit increase in digital platforms there would also be a unit increase in the learning among the youth irrespective of whether it was formal or informal. This would to further overcome rigidities of conventional education. UNFPA (2018) reports that 80% of Uganda's children and youth in school-age years live in rural areas, where they face challenges such as a lack of basic resources and an underdeveloped educational and supporting infrastructure.

What is the Impact of Digital Platforms on The Learning Activity in Uganda?

The Pearson correlation findings gave a positive moderate relationship it emerged that digital platforms enhanced learning among the two different categories of youth at [r (309) =.591, p<0.01]. This tends to agree with the literature that states that the digital divide between the urban and rural based youth is likely to widen the educational gap (Wei & Hindman, 2011) As mentioned by Mwecumi (2021), this would be as a result of un-equal dispersion of digital migration technology in the country. This directly affects formal and informal learning opportunities due to unbalanced access to digital platforms inadequate technology and/or insufficient technological tools.

CONCLUSION

The necessity for a macro-level effort to favourably influence digital-based learning through increased investment in technological learning support for users. Due to limited internet penetration, numerous Ugandans can access online learning. Low digital migration, which affects infrastructure, access costs, unreliable Internet connections and electricity services, weak policy regimes, lack of skilled personnel to manage resources and maintain new delivery modes, a technology-illiterate user group, limited bandwidth, and insufficient access to online scholarly material must be overcome. As a method for achieving education for all, rural and urban access should be improved.

In addition, low internet penetration in Uganda means that a few percentages of the population can access digital based learning. It is acknowledged that the importance of integrating the strengths of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities into the learning experience is a practice that must be adopted to ensure quality learning experience.

RECOMMENDATION

Given that there is a likelihood to affect equity and the quality of learning among the youth, there is need for a stronger policy which emphasises the need for macro-based investments that will enhance increased digital learning as confirmed by Nworie (2012).

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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