
EDUCATION AND YOUTH ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT IN THE DIGITAL DISPENSATION

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Abstract

This study examines youth economic empowerment strategies and their impact on unemployment in Rivers State, Nigeria. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 367 youths residing in Rivers State. The study investigated the extent to which entrepreneurship education, skills acquisition, self-competence, and IT skills training contribute to reducing unemployment among young people. Mean and standard deviation analyses were conducted to assess respondents' perceptions of these strategies. The findings indicate a strong consensus among respondents regarding the effectiveness of youth economic empowerment initiatives in creating job opportunities and fostering economic growth. Specifically, respondents expressed positive attitudes towards entrepreneurship education, skills acquisition, and IT skills training as means to enhance employability and self-sufficiency. However, there were variations in perceptions regarding the willingness of youths to learn new IT skills. The study underscores the importance of context-specific interventions tailored to the needs and realities of young people in Rivers State. Key recommendations include expanding access to entrepreneurship education, strengthening vocational training programs, promoting ICT literacy, and facilitating access to finance for youth-led initiatives. By implementing these recommendations, policymakers and stakeholders can create an enabling environment for youth empowerment and contribute to sustainable socio-economic development in Rivers State.

Keywords: *Youth, economic empowerment, unemployment, entrepreneurship education, skills acquisition, IT skills training, Rivers State, Nigeria.*

Introduction:

In the rapidly evolving landscape of the 21st century, the digital era has ushered in profound transformations across various facets of society, including education and youth economic empowerment (Anderson, 2019). The proliferation of digital technologies has reshaped how individuals learn, work, and engage with the global economy (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014). At the heart of the digital revolution lies the democratization of information and knowledge (Warschauer, 2003). The Internet, coupled with advancements in digital platforms and tools, has revolutionized access to educational resources and learning opportunities (UNESCO, 2013). Today, individuals from diverse backgrounds and geographic locations can access a wealth of information at their fingertips, transcending traditional barriers to education. However, while the digital landscape offers unprecedented access to knowledge, it also underscores persistent disparities in access to technology and internet connectivity (DiMaggio & Hargittai, 2001). In many parts of the world, particularly in underserved communities and rural areas, limited access to technology remains a significant impediment to educational attainment.

Moreover, the digital transformation has redefined the skill sets required for success in the modern workforce (World Economic Forum, 2020). In an increasingly digitalized economy, proficiency in digital literacy, critical thinking, problem-solving, and adaptability has become indispensable (European Commission, 2017). As automation and artificial intelligence reshape industries and job roles, the demand for workers with advanced digital skills continues to escalate. Therefore, educational institutions face the formidable challenge of adapting their curricula to equip youth with the requisite skills to thrive in the digital age. Beyond foundational knowledge, emphasis must be placed on fostering creativity, innovation, and lifelong learning to empower youth to navigate the complexities of the digital economy.

In tandem with the evolution of education, the digital era has also opened up new horizons for youth economic empowerment (Kraemer et al., 2011). Digital platforms and technologies have democratized entrepreneurship, enabling young people to leverage their creativity and ingenuity to create businesses and pursue economic opportunities (Kuek et al., 2017). From e-commerce ventures to freelance marketplaces, digital platforms provide a fertile ground for entrepreneurial endeavors, offering unprecedented reach and scalability. However, while the digital economy holds immense promise for youth entrepreneurship, it also presents unique challenges, including navigating regulatory complexities, securing funding, and managing online reputations.

Furthermore, the digital revolution has reshaped the nature of work, giving rise to the gig economy and remote employment opportunities (Friedman, 2014). With the advent of digital connectivity, individuals can now work flexibly and remotely, transcending geographical boundaries and traditional employment structures. For youth, the gig economy offers newfound autonomy and flexibility, allowing them to pursue diverse income streams and explore their passions (Manyika et al., 2016).

In the realm of finance, the digital era has revolutionized how individuals access and manage their financial resources (GSMA, 2019). Digital financial services, ranging from mobile banking to fintech innovations, have expanded access to financial products and services, particularly among underserved populations (Demirguc-Kunt et al., 2018). For youth, digital financial services offer avenues for financial inclusion and empowerment, enabling them to

save, invest, and participate in the formal economy. However, while digital finance presents opportunities for economic empowerment, it also raises concerns related to data privacy, cybersecurity, and financial literacy, highlighting the need for robust regulatory frameworks and consumer protection measures.

The digital era has reshaped the educational landscape and redefined the pathways to youth economic empowerment. As we navigate this digital dispensation, it is imperative to address the challenges of access, skill development, entrepreneurship, and financial inclusion while harnessing the transformative potential of digital technologies. By investing in digital infrastructure, promoting digital literacy, fostering entrepreneurship, and implementing inclusive policies, stakeholders can empower youth to thrive in the digital economy and realize their full potential as active participants in the global workforce.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of this research is to empirically investigate education and youth economic empowerment within the digital dispensation. The specific objectives include:

- i. To assess the effectiveness of youth economic empowerment strategies in mitigating unemployment in Nigeria.
- ii. To analyze the impact of vocational and technical education on youth economic empowerment in the digital dispensation in Nigeria.
- iii. To examine the correlation between gender equality and youth economic empowerment.
- iv. To identify and assess the challenges associated with education and youth economic empowerment in the digital dispensation in Nigeria.

Research Questions

Based on the aforementioned objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions:

- i. To what extent do youth economic empowerment strategies contribute to the reduction of unemployment in Nigeria?
- ii. How does vocational and technical education influence youth economic empowerment within the digital dispensation in Nigeria?
- iii. What is the relationship between gender equality and youth economic empowerment?
- iv. What challenges are encountered in the realm of education and youth economic empowerment within the digital dispensation in Nigeria?

Literature Review

Education

Education serves as a cornerstone of societal progress, empowering individuals with knowledge, critical thinking abilities, and opportunities for socio-economic advancement (Dewey, 1916). The concept of education extends far beyond formal schooling and encompasses a broad spectrum of learning experiences that occur throughout the lifespan. One fundamental aspect of education is its role in fostering cognitive development and intellectual growth. Through exposure to diverse subjects, methodologies, and perspectives, education stimulates curiosity, inquiry, and analytical thinking skills (Vygotsky, 1978). By encouraging active engagement with knowledge and ideas, education empowers individuals to become lifelong learners who continuously seek to expand their understanding of the world. Through exposure to diverse cultures, histories, and perspectives, education promotes tolerance, appreciation of diversity, and the recognition of common humanity (Banks, 1993). In this way, education serves as a catalyst for social change and transformation, fostering inclusive societies that uphold principles of justice, equality, and human rights.

Moreover, education serves as a vehicle for individual empowerment and socio-economic mobility, particularly in contexts marked by structural inequalities and systemic barriers to opportunity (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). By providing access to knowledge, skills, and resources, education enables individuals to break free from cycles of poverty, discrimination, and marginalization (Sen, 1999). Through formal schooling, vocational training, and lifelong learning initiatives, education equips individuals with the tools they need to pursue meaningful careers, achieve economic independence, and realize their full potential (Mincer, 1958). As such, education serves as a powerful instrument of social justice, enabling individuals to overcome obstacles and pursue pathways to success.

Furthermore, education plays a crucial role in promoting civic participation, democratic governance, and active citizenship within societies (Dewey, 1916). By instilling values of civic responsibility, ethical leadership, and community engagement, education prepares individuals to contribute constructively to the public sphere (Putnam, 2000). Through civic education programs, participatory learning experiences, and opportunities for civic action, education empowers individuals to advocate for social change, uphold democratic principles, and hold institutions accountable to the needs and aspirations of the populace (Hess, 2009). In this way, education nurtures the next generation of informed, engaged citizens who are equipped to address pressing societal challenges and shape the future of their communities.

The concept of education encompasses a diverse array of processes, practices, and outcomes that are central to individual development, societal progress, and global well-being. By investing in inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all, societies can unlock the full potential of every individual and build a more just, prosperous, and sustainable future for generations to come.

Youth Economic Empowerment

Youth economic empowerment is a multifaceted concept that encompasses various strategies, policies, and programs aimed at enhancing the economic well-being and autonomy of young people (World Bank, 2006). As a critical component of sustainable development, youth economic empowerment seeks to equip young individuals with the knowledge, skills,

resources, and opportunities necessary to participate actively in the economy and realize their full potential (UNDP, 2016). In many societies, youth represent a significant demographic group facing unique challenges and opportunities in the transition to adulthood and economic independence. Therefore, promoting youth economic empowerment is essential for fostering inclusive growth, reducing poverty, and advancing social equity.

One key aspect of youth economic empowerment is the promotion of entrepreneurship and self-employment opportunities among young people (ILO, 2012). Entrepreneurship offers a pathway for youth to create jobs, generate income, and contribute to economic growth and innovation (UNCTAD, 2015). By fostering an entrepreneurial mindset and providing support for business development and start-up ventures, governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders can empower young individuals to harness their creativity, initiative, and talents to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors (World Bank, 2013). Moreover, entrepreneurship education and training programs equip young people with the necessary skills and knowledge to identify business opportunities, develop viable business plans, access financing, and navigate the challenges of entrepreneurship (EU, 2020).

Furthermore, youth economic empowerment initiatives often prioritize enhancing access to education, vocational training, and skills development opportunities for young people (UNESCO, 2012). Education and skills training are essential for equipping youth with the competencies and qualifications needed to secure decent employment, advance their careers, and adapt to changing labor market demands (ILO, 2019). Vocational and technical education programs provide practical, hands-on training in specific trades and occupations, enabling young individuals to acquire marketable skills and certifications that enhance their employability and earning potential (OECD, 2019). Moreover, investing in education and skills development for young people yields long-term dividends by promoting social mobility, reducing inequality, and fostering sustainable economic growth (World Bank, 2019).

In addition to entrepreneurship and education, promoting financial inclusion and access to financial services is a crucial aspect of youth economic empowerment (CGAP, 2016). Many young people, particularly those from low-income backgrounds, face barriers to accessing formal financial services such as savings accounts, credit, insurance, and digital payment platforms (UNCDF, 2018). Limited access to financial services constrains youth's ability to save, invest, and manage their finances effectively, hindering their economic independence and resilience (IFC, 2020). Therefore, efforts to expand financial inclusion for youth involve initiatives such as financial literacy training, mobile banking services, microfinance programs, and innovative fintech solutions tailored to the needs and preferences of young people (GSMA, 2017). By increasing access to financial services and promoting financial literacy, youth economic empowerment initiatives aim to enhance financial resilience, promote asset accumulation, and facilitate economic participation and social inclusion (UNDP, 2020).

Moreover, gender equality and social inclusion are central considerations in youth economic empowerment efforts (UN Women, 2019). Gender disparities persist in access to education, employment, financial resources, and decision-making opportunities, limiting young women's economic agency and opportunities for advancement (ILO, 2018). Therefore, youth economic empowerment initiatives seek to address gender-based barriers and promote equal opportunities for young women and men to access education, employment, entrepreneurship support, and financial services (UNFPA, 2017). By mainstreaming gender considerations and

adopting inclusive approaches, youth economic empowerment programs can contribute to breaking down structural barriers, challenging gender norms, and fostering more equitable and inclusive societies (UNICEF, 2021).

Youth economic empowerment is a vital component of efforts to promote sustainable development, reduce poverty, and achieve inclusive growth. By investing in entrepreneurship, education, skills development, financial inclusion, and gender equality for young people, societies can unlock the potential of youth as drivers of innovation, productivity, and social change. Moreover, by prioritizing youth economic empowerment, policymakers, businesses, and civil society organizations can contribute to building more resilient, equitable, and prosperous societies for future generations.

Youth Economic Empowerment Strategies

Youth economic empowerment strategies encompass a spectrum of interventions, policies, and initiatives designed to enhance the economic opportunities, skills, and agency of young people. In many regions, youth face unique challenges in accessing economic opportunities and realizing their full potential. Authors such as Adeyemi and Akintayo (2020) have examined the role of vocational education in enhancing youth employability and economic empowerment within specific contexts, such as Nigeria. They highlight the importance of vocational training programs in equipping young individuals with practical skills and certifications that enhance their prospects in the job market. By examining local initiatives and policies, these authors shed light on the effectiveness of targeted interventions in promoting youth economic empowerment within specific socio-economic contexts.

Internationally, organizations like the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) and the World Bank have conducted extensive research on youth economic empowerment strategies worldwide. The OECD (2020) provides insights into global best practices in youth entrepreneurship policies and programs, emphasizing the importance of creating an enabling environment that supports young innovators and business owners. They highlight the need for comprehensive entrepreneurship education, access to finance, and supportive regulatory frameworks to foster youth entrepreneurship. Moreover, the World Bank's World Development Reports offer comprehensive analyses of youth economic empowerment strategies across different regions. Reports such as the World Development Report 2019: The Changing Nature of Work (World Bank, 2018) explore the evolving landscape of work and the implications for youth employment and economic opportunities. By examining global trends and challenges, these reports inform policymakers and practitioners about effective interventions and policies to promote youth economic empowerment on a global scale.

By integrating these themes into comprehensive youth economic empowerment strategies, policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders can create an enabling environment that empowers young people to realize their aspirations, contribute to economic growth, and build more inclusive and resilient societies for the future. Youth economic empowerment is a multifaceted endeavor that requires concerted efforts from local and international stakeholders. By promoting entrepreneurship, investing in skills development, expanding access to finance, and advancing gender equality, youth economic empowerment strategies can unlock the potential of young people as agents of change, innovation, and sustainable development.

Vocational and Technical Education (VTE)

Vocational and technical education (VTE) plays a crucial role in preparing individuals for specific careers, equipping them with practical skills and knowledge needed to succeed in various industries and sectors. This form of education focuses on hands-on training, industry-specific competencies, and job-related skills that are essential for meeting the demands of the labor market. In this essay, we will explore the significance of vocational and technical education, its benefits, challenges, and its role in youth economic empowerment.

Vocational and technical education serves as a pathway to employment and career advancement for individuals who may not pursue traditional academic routes. Unlike conventional academic programs, VTE emphasizes practical training and skill development in specific trades, professions, and industries (Ducharme, 2007). Through a combination of classroom instruction, hands-on exercises, and workplace experiences, VTE programs enable learners to acquire industry-relevant competencies and certifications that are valued by employers (Olaitan, 2019). By focusing on practical applications of knowledge and skills, VTE prepares individuals for immediate entry into the workforce, thereby facilitating smooth transitions from education to employment (Bragg et al., 2016).

One of the key benefits of vocational and technical education is its responsiveness to changing labor market needs and industry trends. VTE programs are designed in collaboration with employers, industry associations, and professional bodies to ensure that curriculum content remains relevant and up-to-date (Hyslop-Margison & Sears, 2016). By incorporating input from industry stakeholders, VTE institutions can tailor their programs to address emerging skills gaps, technological advancements, and evolving job requirements (Corsi & Guerriero, 2013). As a result, graduates of VTE programs are equipped with the practical skills and knowledge needed to meet the demands of today's dynamic and competitive job market (Zelloth, 2010).

Furthermore, vocational and technical education contributes to economic development by promoting workforce productivity, innovation, and competitiveness. In an increasingly globalized economy, countries that invest in VTE stand to gain a competitive edge by nurturing a skilled workforce capable of driving growth and innovation (Grollmann, 2016). VTE graduates often possess specialized skills and technical expertise that are in high demand across various industries, including manufacturing, construction, healthcare, and information technology (Bowlby, 2012). By fostering a skilled workforce, VTE programs support economic diversification, industrialization, and technological advancement, thereby contributing to overall prosperity and socio-economic development (Lee & Wong, 2020).

Despite its numerous benefits, vocational and technical education faces several challenges that hinder its effectiveness and accessibility. One significant challenge is the persistent stigma associated with VTE, which often leads to negative perceptions and misconceptions about its value and prestige compared to traditional academic pathways (Keep, 2011). In many societies, VTE is often perceived as a second-choice option for students who are deemed academically or intellectually inferior, perpetuating a cultural bias towards academic education (Lasonen & Välijärvi, 2014). As a result, many young people may overlook VTE opportunities and pursue academic routes, even if they are better suited for vocational and technical careers (Bourdieu, 1986).

Moreover, the quality and relevance of VTE programs vary widely across different regions and countries, leading to disparities in outcomes and opportunities for learners. In some cases, VTE institutions may lack adequate resources, infrastructure, and instructional capacity to deliver high-quality training and education (Fuller & Johnston, 2010). Additionally, rapid technological advancements and changes in industry practices require continuous adaptation and innovation in VTE curriculum and delivery methods (Billet, 2011). However, many VTE systems struggle to keep pace with evolving industry needs, resulting in skills mismatches and gaps between educational offerings and labor market demands (Dumont et al., 2010).

Furthermore, access to VTE programs may be limited for certain groups, including marginalized communities, individuals with disabilities, and those from low-income backgrounds (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Factors such as geographic location, financial constraints, and social barriers may prevent these populations from accessing VTE opportunities and benefiting from skill development initiatives (Eraut, 2004). As a result, VTE programs may exacerbate existing inequalities and perpetuate socio-economic disparities, rather than serving as pathways to empowerment and social mobility for all individuals (Baltzer & Steiner-Khamsi, 2016).

In conclusion, vocational and technical education plays a critical role in preparing individuals for careers, promoting workforce productivity, and driving economic development. By equipping learners with practical skills, industry-relevant competencies, and job-related knowledge, VTE programs enable individuals to succeed in various sectors and contribute to overall prosperity. However, VTE faces challenges related to stigma, quality, relevance, and accessibility, which must be addressed to maximize its potential for youth economic empowerment and socio-economic development. By investing in high-quality VTE programs, expanding access to opportunities, and challenging cultural stereotypes, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can create an inclusive and dynamic VTE ecosystem that empowers individuals, strengthens communities, and drives sustainable growth.

Education and Youth Economic Empowerment in the digital Dispensation

In Nigeria, the discourse on education and youth economic empowerment in the digital dispensation is enriched by the contributions of local scholars and practitioners who understand the unique challenges and opportunities facing the country's youth population. Adekola and Fasakin (2019) emphasize the importance of digital literacy and skills development in preparing Nigerian youth for the digital economy. They argue that integrating digital literacy into the education system is crucial for empowering young people to leverage digital technologies for economic opportunities.

Furthermore, Ojo and Akinyemi (2020) highlight the role of entrepreneurship education in fostering youth economic empowerment in Nigeria. They emphasize the need for entrepreneurship curricula that are tailored to the local context and address the specific challenges faced by Nigerian youth. By equipping young people with entrepreneurial skills and mindset, education can empower them to create their economic opportunities in the digital age.

On the international front, researchers like UNESCO (2020) have conducted studies on digital inclusion and education in developing countries, including Nigeria. Their research

underscores the importance of bridging the digital divide and ensuring equitable access to digital technologies for all segments of the population. UNESCO advocates for policies and initiatives that promote digital literacy, connectivity, and access to affordable digital devices, particularly in underserved communities.

Moreover, the World Bank has published reports on youth unemployment and economic empowerment in Nigeria, offering insights into the country's demographic trends, labor market dynamics, and policy implications. Reports such as the World Bank (2018) underscore the importance of investing in education, skills training, and job creation to address youth unemployment and unlock the potential of Nigeria's youthful population.

Local authors such as Oladeji and Ajadi (2021) have also examined the impact of digital entrepreneurship on youth economic empowerment in Nigeria. Their research explores how young Nigerians are leveraging digital platforms and technologies to start and grow businesses, create employment opportunities, and contribute to economic development. By harnessing the power of digital entrepreneurship, Nigerian youth can overcome traditional barriers to entry into the formal economy and participate actively in the digital revolution.

In summary, the discourse on education and youth economic empowerment in Nigeria benefits from the perspectives of both local and international authors. Local scholars provide insights into the country's specific context, challenges, and opportunities, while international research offers broader perspectives and comparative analyses. By integrating insights from diverse sources, policymakers, educators, and stakeholders can develop holistic strategies to empower Nigerian youth for success in the digital age.

Theoretical Framework

Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory views human beings not only as labor inputs but also as capital assets that can be developed and enhanced through investments in education, skills development, and health care (Schultz, 1961; Becker, 1964). In this essay, we will explore the key concepts of human capital theory, its implications for individual outcomes and societal development, as well as critiques and challenges associated with its application. Education is considered a primary form of human capital investment, as it equips individuals with cognitive skills, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking capacities essential for success in the labor market (Becker, 1964). Formal schooling not only imparts subject-specific knowledge but also fosters important non-cognitive skills such as communication, teamwork, and adaptability (Hanushek & Woessmann, 2015). Moreover, higher levels of education are associated with lower unemployment rates, higher job satisfaction, and greater social mobility (Oreopoulos & Salvanes, 2011).

Skills training and lifelong learning also play a critical role in enhancing human capital accumulation throughout individuals' careers. In a rapidly changing economy characterized by technological advancements and automation, continuous skill upgrading is essential for remaining competitive and adaptable in the labor market (Acemoglu & Autor, 2011). Lifelong learning initiatives, vocational training programs, and professional development opportunities enable individuals to acquire new skills, stay abreast of industry trends, and transition between occupations and industries (Cedefop, 2021).

Furthermore, investments in health and well-being are integral components of human capital formation. Healthy individuals are more productive, resilient, and able to participate fully in economic and social activities (Bloom et al., 2007). Access to healthcare services, preventive measures, and nutrition programs contribute to improved health outcomes, reduced absenteeism, and increased workforce participation (Cutler et al., 2006). As such, investments in public health infrastructure and healthcare systems are recognized as essential drivers of human capital development and economic prosperity.

From a macroeconomic perspective, human capital theory underscores the importance of investing in education, health, and skills development as drivers of long-term economic growth and prosperity (Barro & Lee, 2013). Countries with higher levels of human capital tend to experience higher levels of productivity, innovation, and competitiveness in the global marketplace (Mankiw et al., 1992). Moreover, human capital investment is associated with positive spillover effects, including technological advancement, knowledge diffusion, and social cohesion (Lucas, 1988). Thus, policymakers prioritize human capital development as a key strategy for achieving sustainable development goals and improving living standards for their populations (World Bank, 2019).

However, human capital theory is not without its critiques and challenges. One criticism is that it tends to overlook structural barriers and inequalities that limit individuals' access to education, training, and healthcare services (Bowles & Gintis, 1976). Socioeconomic disparities, discrimination, and institutional barriers often hinder marginalized groups, including women, minorities, and individuals from low-income backgrounds, from fully realizing their human capital potential (Heckman & Kautz, 2012). Moreover, the theory's narrow focus on individual-level outcomes may neglect broader social and environmental factors that influence human capital formation, such as family background, community support, and macroeconomic conditions (Sen, 1999).

Human capital theory provides a valuable framework for understanding the role of education, training, and health in driving individual productivity and societal development. By investing in human capital, individuals enhance their skills, knowledge, and well-being, thereby contributing to economic growth and prosperity. However, realizing the full potential of human capital requires addressing systemic inequalities, promoting inclusive access to education and healthcare, and fostering supportive environments that enable all individuals to thrive and contribute to society.

Empirical Review

Previous studies on youth economic empowerment in developing countries have yielded valuable insights into various strategies, interventions, and their impacts on young people's livelihoods and socio-economic outcomes. These studies span a range of disciplines, including economics, sociology, development studies, and entrepreneurship, contributing to a nuanced understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing youth in these contexts.

One prevalent theme in previous research is the role of entrepreneurship education and training programs in empowering young people to create sustainable livelihoods and contribute to economic growth. Studies by Kantis et al. (2004) and Dabalén et al. (2008) have highlighted the positive impact of entrepreneurship education on youth employment and enterprise development in developing countries. These programs equip young people with the

necessary skills, knowledge, and mindset to identify opportunities, overcome challenges, and succeed as entrepreneurs in dynamic and often resource-constrained environments.

Moreover, vocational training and skills development initiatives have emerged as critical pathways to enhance youth employability and productivity in developing countries. Research by McKenzie and Woodruff (2014) and Card et al. (2011) has demonstrated the effectiveness of vocational training programs in improving labor market outcomes for young people, including higher earnings, increased job opportunities, and reduced unemployment rates. By equipping youth with market-relevant skills and technical competencies, vocational training programs play a vital role in bridging the gap between education and employment, particularly in sectors with high demand for skilled labor.

Furthermore, studies have examined the impact of microfinance and access to finance initiatives on youth entrepreneurship and economic empowerment in developing countries. Research by Morduch (1999) and Armendariz and Morduch (2010) has highlighted the role of microfinance in providing young entrepreneurs with capital, resources, and financial literacy support to start and grow their businesses. Microfinance institutions and innovative financing mechanisms offer alternative pathways for youth to access credit, build assets, and invest in income-generating activities, thereby fostering economic inclusion and poverty reduction among marginalized youth populations.

Additionally, research on the gender dimensions of youth economic empowerment has underscored the importance of addressing gender disparities and promoting women's entrepreneurship and leadership in developing countries. Studies by Gürakar et al. (2018) and Malhotra et al. (2011) have highlighted the unique challenges faced by young women in accessing education, finance, and entrepreneurial opportunities, as well as the transformative potential of gender-sensitive policies and interventions. Empowering young women to participate actively in economic activities not only promotes gender equality but also contributes to broader socio-economic development and poverty alleviation goals.

Methodology

The study employed a cross-sectional survey research design to investigate the perceptions of employed and unemployed youths in Rivers State. The population of the study comprised both employed and unemployed youths in the state, with a focus on the unemployed segment. Rivers State has an estimated population of three million according to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2023).

Using Taro Yamen Formula, the researcher determined a sample size of four hundred youths. Purposive sampling was adopted to select 400 respondents who were deemed knowledgeable and well-informed about the phenomenon under investigation. Data were collected through questionnaires administered to the selected respondents.

Mean and standard deviation were used for data analysis, with statistical package for social science (SPSS version 23.0) employed for analysis.

Of the 384 distributed questionnaires, 371 were retrieved, resulting in a response rate of 96.6%. Out of the retrieved questionnaires, 367 were deemed usable for analysis. The demographic variables examined included gender, age, and highest educational qualification.

The results indicated that the majority of the respondents were usable for the study, with only a small percentage deemed not usable. The demographic analysis focused on gender distribution among the sample population, providing insights into the composition of the study participants.

Analyses

Table 1.

S/ N	Items	SA (5)	A (4)	NS (3)	NS (2)	SD (1)	Total	\bar{x}	SD	Remark
1	Entrepreneurship education will create job opportunities in the business sector	161 43.9% 805	169 46.0% 676	17 4.6% 51	11 3.0% 22	9 2.5% 9	367 100% 1563	4.3	0.87	Agreed
2	Skills acquisition leads to technological advancement in Nigeria	227 61.8% 1135	136 37.1% 544	4 1.1% 12	0 0% 0	0 0% 0	367 100% 1709	4.7	0.51	Agreed
3	Self-competence in handling technical works	201 54.8% 1005	162 44.1% 648	4 1.1% 12	0 0% 0	0 0% 0	367 100% 1665	4.5	0.52	Agreed
4	Youths are willing and eager to learn new Computer/IT skills	145 39.5% 725	155 42.2% 620	26 7.1% 78	24 6.5% 48	17 4.6% 17	367 100% 1488	4.1	1.07	
	Total	734	622	51	35	26	1468	4.4	0.74	Agreed
		3670	2488	153	70	31	6412			

Source: Researcher's Field Survey, 2023

Table 1 presents the mean (\bar{x}) and standard deviation (SD) analysis regarding the extent to which youth economic empowerment strategies contribute to reducing unemployment in Nigeria. The table includes five items, each representing a statement related to various aspects of youth economic empowerment.

The first item explores the perception that entrepreneurship education will create job opportunities in the business sector. The majority of respondents strongly agreed (SA) or agreed (A) with this statement, as indicated by the high mean score of 4.3 and a relatively low standard deviation of 0.87. This suggests a consensus among respondents regarding the potential of entrepreneurship education to generate employment opportunities.

Similarly, the second item examines the belief that skills acquisition leads to technological advancement in Nigeria. Again, the majority of respondents agreed with this statement, resulting in a high mean score of 4.7 and a low standard deviation of 0.51. This indicates a high level of agreement among respondents regarding the role of skills acquisition in driving technological progress.

The third item focuses on self-competence in handling technical works. The results show that respondents generally agreed with this statement, with a mean score of 4.5 and a standard deviation of 0.52. This suggests a shared belief among respondents in the importance of self-competence in technical skills for economic empowerment.

The fourth item examines the willingness of youths to learn new Computer/IT skills. The majority of respondents agreed with this statement, though to a lesser extent compared to the

previous items. The mean score of 4.1 and a relatively high standard deviation of 1.07 indicate some variability in responses, with a subset of respondents expressing less agreement with the statement.

Overall, the total mean score for all items related to youth economic empowerment strategies was 4.4, with a standard deviation of 0.74. This suggests a generally positive perception among respondents regarding the efficacy of youth economic empowerment strategies in reducing unemployment in Nigeria. The relatively low standard deviation indicates a moderate level of agreement among respondents across the various items.

The findings presented in Table 1 highlight the perceived effectiveness of youth economic empowerment strategies in addressing unemployment challenges in Nigeria. The high mean scores and low standard deviations indicate a strong consensus among respondents regarding the potential impact of entrepreneurship education, skills acquisition, self-competence, and IT skills training in promoting youth employment and economic empowerment in the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the critical role of youth economic empowerment strategies in addressing unemployment challenges in Nigeria, particularly in Rivers State. The analysis of survey data revealed a strong consensus among respondents regarding the effectiveness of entrepreneurship education, skills acquisition, self-competence, and IT skills training in creating job opportunities and fostering economic empowerment among youths. The high mean scores and low standard deviations across various items indicate a shared belief in the potential of these strategies to mitigate unemployment and promote socio-economic development in the region. The positive perceptions identified in the study suggest that stakeholders, including policymakers, educators, and civil society organizations, should prioritize the implementation of youth-focused economic empowerment programs. These initiatives should aim to enhance access to entrepreneurship education, vocational training, and IT skills development, thereby equipping young people with the necessary tools and competencies to succeed in today's competitive job market.

Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of context-specific interventions tailored to the needs and realities of youth in Rivers State. Addressing unemployment requires a multi-faceted approach that considers socio-economic factors, cultural dynamics, and regional disparities. Collaboration between government agencies, private sector actors, and community-based organizations is essential to ensure the effectiveness and sustainability of youth economic empowerment initiatives. Moving forward, future research should explore the long-term impacts of youth economic empowerment programs on employment outcomes, income generation, and overall well-being. Additionally, studies examining the role of mentorship, access to finance, and supportive policy environments in facilitating youth entrepreneurship and economic inclusion would further enrich our understanding of effective strategies for addressing unemployment in Nigeria. While challenges persist, the findings of this study offer valuable insights and opportunities for action in advancing youth economic empowerment agendas in Rivers State and beyond. By investing in the potential of young people and fostering an enabling environment for entrepreneurship and skills development, Nigeria can harness the demographic dividend of its youthful population and drive sustainable economic growth and prosperity.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn from the study on youth economic empowerment strategies in Rivers State, Nigeria, several recommendations can be proposed to enhance the effectiveness of initiatives aimed at addressing unemployment and promoting socio-economic development among young people:

1. **Expand Access to Entrepreneurship Education:** There is a need to scale up entrepreneurship education programs at both secondary and tertiary levels of education. Curricula should be designed to impart practical business skills, foster innovative thinking, and instill an entrepreneurial mindset among students.
2. **Strengthen Vocational and Skills Training:** Investing in vocational training centers and technical institutions can provide young people with market-relevant skills and certifications.
3. **Training programs and workshops on coding, digital marketing, and software development can empower youths to leverage technology for entrepreneurship and employment opportunities.**
4. **Facilitate Access to Finance:** Access to affordable financing remains a significant barrier for aspiring young entrepreneurs. Government and financial institutions should establish youth-friendly loan schemes, grants, and venture capital funds to support youth-led startups and small businesses.
5. **Provide Mentorship and Networking Opportunities:** Mentorship programs connecting experienced entrepreneurs with aspiring youths can provide invaluable guidance, advice, and support in navigating the challenges of starting and growing a business. Networking events, incubators, and accelerators can also facilitate peer learning and collaboration among young entrepreneurs.

By implementing these recommendations, policymakers, stakeholders, and development partners can create an enabling environment that empowers young people to realize their full potential, contribute to economic growth, and drive positive change in Rivers State and beyond.

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