Who is Influencing Who?
Unpacking Youth and Influence in Africa
A Summary of a Nine-Country Survey
January 2023
About this report

Africa is a diverse and complex continent, consisting of 54 countries, 5 regions and about 2,000 languages. This report identifies what influences African youths' attitudes and decisions. It is based on a survey of 4,500 people, aged 18–35, in nine African countries: Egypt, Morocco, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, South Africa and Zimbabwe. These nine countries act as proxy for the continent and provide evidence of a wide range of attitudes to the issues raised. The research was funded by Africa No Filter and Facebook in partnership with the African Union and AUDA-NEPAD.

About Africa No Filter

Africa No Filter is a donor collaborative that is working to shift stereotypical and harmful narratives within and about Africa. Through research, grant-making, community building and advocacy, our objective is to build the field of narrative change-makers by supporting storytellers, investing in media platforms and driving disruption campaigns. The donor collaborative is funded by:

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

According to 73% of the survey respondents, African countries – especially South Africa, Nigeria and Egypt – have a global influence. However, the respondents also recognised that many negative stereotypes of Africa are perpetuated, and that these damaged how the world sees the continent. Indeed, about 45% of respondents stated that these stereotypes had influenced their own perceptions negatively. However, despite this, 60% of respondents still said they loved their country and the continent.

This positive view is likely because respondents did not show a strong reliance on mainstream media in their decision-making. Instead, they were mainly influenced by popular culture, social media, their communities, their friends and families, religion and, to some extent, cultural practices.

While respondents recognised that in their own countries, politicians (58%) and business leaders (33%) had the most power, these did not influence respondents strongly. The only time respondents said politicians had a strong influence on them was when they had to decide about who to vote for; even then, 43% of North African respondents indicated that no one swayed their voting decisions.

Beyond being personally influenced by social media, 71% of respondents felt they could use social media to challenge stereotypes of Africa. While their confidence in this regard could be rooted in techno-optimism, several examples cited in previous research point to good reasons for believing that social media empowers young Africans to engage in narrative-changing social media, through using hashtags. The data in this report, alongside existing literature, strongly point to the relevance of using social media and popular culture to shift narratives about the continent, even though young Africans are influenced by an array of other factors.
KEY INSIGHTS

1. Most respondents (71%) believed they could challenge negative stereotypes about the continent on social media:
   Albeit that the research did not dig into the origins of this belief, previous research has turned up several examples of how young Africans have – and continue to – shift negative stereotypes at a global level, especially in sharing and using humor to get a message across.

2. Even though 45% of respondents believed their perceptions had been shaped by negative narratives about the continent, 60% still loved their country and the African continent:
   Only 18% of respondents indicated that they would rather live in the United States (US) or Europe, only 20% believed that there are fewer opportunities on the African continent than elsewhere, and only 17% believed that they experienced a lower quality of life on the continent than they would elsewhere.

3. The main influences on respondents were pop culture (57%), social media (27%), family and friends (44%), religion (74%) and their communities’ cultural practices (54%):
   While 45% of respondents believed that other African youth were strongly influenced by the United States and Europe, they stated that, for them, family and friends had the biggest influence. However, most Kenyan and South African respondents indicated that social media had more influence (39% each) than did family and friends. And across the board, respondents’ religions played a large role in their decision-making.

4. Although 58% of respondents said politicians were the most influential people in their country, only 11% said they were influenced by politicians:
   The only time respondents said they were influenced by politicians was when making voting decisions (51%), however even in this instance, a worrying 24% (including 43% of North African respondents) said they were not influenced by anyone when they made voting decisions, which might indicate a disinterest in election politics.

5. In the view of 54% of respondents, the most common narratives about Africa in movies were about crime and corruption, and 41% said they were stories about underdeveloped cities:
   Respondents (75%) believed these stories created a negative perception about the continent, with Kenyans (83%), Ghanaians and Zimbabweans (82% each) most convinced of the negative impact.
1 INTRODUCTION

Africa No Filter (ANF) has identified stereotypical narratives about Africa as a driver of negative perceptions of the continent; these narratives shape not only the perceptions of people outside Africa, but also our own. As much as it is important to understand the narratives that shape attitudes, it is as important to identify the source of the narrative, i.e. who influences the narrative. Therefore, this study unpacks which powerful people and cultural/political institutions influence young Africans and what this means for changing the narratives.

ANF commissioned GeoPoll to poll youth in nine African countries to unpack prevailing narratives that affect them, and the polls were conducted during April 2021. This research forms part of ANF’s mission to research, analyse and understand the impact of harmful and stereotypical narratives within and about Africa.
2 METHODOLOGY

Random sampling was used to interview 4,500 young people in nine countries in the four geographical regions in Africa: East, West, Southern and North Africa. We reached 500 respondents, aged 18–35, in each country depicted in Figure 1.

Questions were designed by GeoPoll and ANF, and interviews were conducted in English, French and Arabic. Call-centre operators in each country were trained to contact respondents using an automatic dialling system and conduct interviews via mobile phone. Those contacted could opt in or out of the interviews; those who opted in received airtime credits. Call-centre operators continued to conduct interviews until the desired number of respondents was achieved. For a full list of the questions asked, please go to the list of questions on page 17.

Due to trends in mobile ownership, most of the respondents were urban (varying between countries, from 99% in Ivory Coast to 74% in Egypt) and/or had achieved higher education. However, rural and/or less educated youth were not screened out. The number of respondents who had achieved secondary education or higher was above 95% in most countries, except for Egypt (79%) and Morocco (68%). There were about equal numbers of men and women respondents across all countries, except for Ivory Coast, where respondents were about two-thirds men and one-third women.

We acknowledge the limitations of this report: the study was conducted in nine African countries, and therefore we cannot claim that the report is comprehensive. Further, the study was slightly biased towards Anglophone African countries, except for two French speaking countries (Ivory Coast and Morocco) and one Arabic country (Egypt). The demographic is also skewed towards urban youth, as described above.

In many cases we sought to draw general conclusions about continent-wide attitudes to creativity and innovation, but where relevant, we have shared distinctions between regions and countries.
3 RESEARCH FINDINGS

The research findings in this report focus on three areas: Africa's influence on the world; influences on African youth; and portrayals of Africa and how these shape respondents' perceptions of Africa.

3.1 African influence on the world

East Africans, especially Ugandans (91%), were most likely to believe Africa is influential (89%). North Africans, especially Egyptians (51%), were less likely to believe Africa was influential (61%). See Figure 2.

Respondents were asked which African countries they thought had most influence on the continent. Most (34%) believed South Africa was the most influential, followed by Nigeria (23%) and Egypt (11%). However, 75% of Egyptian respondents believed Egypt was the most influential, 80% of Moroccan respondents thought Morocco was the most influential and 61% of Nigerian respondents thought Nigeria was the most influential. Previous research by ANF (for example our climate change report), has shown that the three African countries that receive the most mainstream media coverage are South Africa, Nigeria and Kenya; despite this, only 4% of respondents in this present survey perceived Kenya as influential, and only 27% of Kenyans, themselves, thought Kenya was most influential.
3.2 Influences on African youth

Respondents were asked what they thought influenced other young Africans (more than one option could be selected). Most respondents (57%) believed the biggest influence on African youth is pop culture, followed by the US and Europe (45%), politicians (31%) and communities (29%). Kenyan respondents were the most likely to focus their answers on pop culture (87%), followed by Zimbabwe (69%). However, most West African respondents (65%) perceived the US and Europe as more influential, especially those in Côte d’Ivoire (72%) (see Figure 4). In North Africa, most Moroccan respondents (64%) also thought the US and Europe have the most influence.

Given the cited influence of pop culture, this arena shows the most potential for changing the dominant narrative. However, it is still concerning that most respondents saw a large amount of influence coming from the US and Europe.

Politicians were not considered to exert much direct influence on the respondents; only 11% said they were influential (see Figure 5). In this study, 44% of respondents said their family and friends influenced them the most, followed by social media (27%) and pop culture (26%).
culture (12%). Moroccan respondents (60%) were most likely to be influenced by family and friends, however most Kenyans and South Africans saw social media as more influential (39% each). Given that this study focused on young Africans with access to a cell phone – and, therefore, likely access to social media – the strong influence of social media is not surprising, and importantly, this might not reflect the views of many young Africans without access to a cell phone or to social media.

**Figure 5: What influences you the most?**

- Politicians: 6%
- Family and friends: 11%
- Pop culture: 27%
- Social media: 44%
- Don't know: 12%

Figures 4 and 5 imply that the best way to reach young Africans with transformative narratives is through social media and pop culture.

While 44% of respondents acknowledged the influence of family and friends (see Figure 5), 45% believed that older African people still have influence on the young, with 31% claiming that their influence is fading. Of Moroccan respondents, 42% believed old people no longer have influence. However, many East African respondents (56%), including 71% of Ugandans believed old people still have influence (see Figure 6).
The findings displayed in Figures 4, 5 and 6 support the suggestion that the modern influence of social media and pop culture on youth in Africa is growing, and the traditional influence of elders and politicians is diminishing.

As stated earlier, 29% of respondents said they thought communities strongly influence youth. To find out what part of community life has an impact on African youth, we examined the influence of religion and cultural practices on respondents (Figures 7 and 8).

Most respondents (74%) indicated that religion influenced their life decisions, with North African respondents (78%) particularly indicating religion as a strong influence, followed closely by South African respondents (77%) (see Figure 7). West African (73%) and East African (70%) respondents indicated that religion had marginally less influence on them.

There was also not a marked difference between respondents influenced by community practices (54%) and those not influenced (43%). However, a higher number of North African respondents (68%) indicated that they were influenced by cultural practices. South African respondents (55%) and Ghanaian respondents (52%) were slightly less likely to be influenced by cultural practices.

With respect to community influence then, religion showed a stronger influence on young people (see Figure 7) than cultural practices (see Figure 8), albeit that most North African respondents were strongly influence by both religion and cultural practices.
As well as exploring who influences youth, we asked respondents for their views on who were the most influential types of people in their country (more than one option could be selected). Most responded that politicians (58%) were the most influential, followed by business leaders (33%) and musicians (32%).

West African respondents (76%) were most likely to see politicians as being strongly influential, especially those in Côte d’Ivoire (84%), but West Africans also believed musicians to be influential (42%), more so even than business leaders (30%) (see Figure 9). Many Kenyan respondents (83%) also believed politicians were the most influential. However, most North African respondents (35%) believed businesspeople are more influential than politicians (23%).

The comparison of Figures 4 to 8 with shows a stark difference between who respondents thought exerted an influence on themselves and other youth, and who they thought to be the most influential (powerful) in their country,
pointing to a gap in power and influence structure.

Given the above data, we sought to understand what was influencing youth voting patterns; in other words, if they were not influenced by politicians in their day-to-day lives, did politicians influence them during elections? (See Figure 9). Indeed, just more than half of respondents (51%) said that the campaign approach of politicians exerted the most influence on their voting decisions, indicating that, even if not overall influential, politicians do influence votes. Most East African respondents (65%) were likely to be influenced by politicians’ campaigns, perhaps showing more political engagement among East Africa youth. Among North African respondents, only 31% said they were influenced by politicians’ campaign work.

The only other group that seemed to exert a strong influence on voting decisions was family (reported by 16% of respondents). North African respondents reported being slightly more influenced by family than average (18%) Southern African respondents (21%) were most likely to be influenced by family.

However, 24% of respondents said their decisions were not influenced at all, which might suggest (worryingly) that they were disengaged from politics or unlikely to vote. Most North African respondents (43%) said no one influence them.

Although it is difficult to compare across the data sets in this section, due to different variables, each data set shows North Africans to be the least likely to be influenced by politicians or their campaigns. The data also shows the strong influence of religion on respondents’ lives, with cultural practices having a lower but still significant influence, especially in North Africa. Further, respondents were greatly influenced by youth culture (pop culture, social media and musicians) – indicating that this area is one to explore in changing the narrative.

3.3 Portrayals of Africa and their impact

Given that stereotypical narratives about Africa are abundant, we asked young Africans what they believe to be the dominant negative stories about the continent in movies (more than one option could be selected).
Most respondents (54%) said that common negative narratives were about crime and corruption, followed by narratives set in underdeveloped cities (41%) and depicting uneducated, unexposed Africans (33%). Stories about crime and corruption were the most cited across all regions, with West African respondents (63%) the most numerous in noting it (see Figure 11). However, at country level, Kenyan respondents (74%) were most likely to point to this theme, and they were also most likely to point to the theme of underdeveloped cities (65%) and uneducated, unexposed Africans (61%).

Figure 11: What do you think are the dominant stories in movies about Africa?

![Bar chart showing percentages of respondents for each theme in different regions]

Having identified common negative stories about Africa, respondents were asked to reflect on the impact of those stories, firstly on the world's perceptions of Africa (Figure 12), and then on their own perceptions of the continent (Figure 13). Regarding the impact on the world's perceptions, 75% of respondents said the stories created a negative perception about the continent. However, the perception varied across the four regions, with the lowest perception of negative impact being among North Africans (63%) and the highest among East Africans (81%) (see Figure 12). At country level, Kenyan respondents (83%) were most likely to cite the negative impact, followed by Ghanaian and Zimbabwean respondents (82% each). Moroccan respondents (58%) were least likely to believe the impact was negative.
With respect to the negative impact of stories in films on their own perceptions of Africa, slightly more respondents (50%) stated that films had not influenced them; 45% stated they had been influenced. While 48% of North African respondents stated they had not been influenced, 16% did not know whether they had been influenced (Figure 13). At a country level, Kenyan respondents (56%) were particularly confident they had not been influenced. By contrast, Ugandan respondents were most likely to say they had (54%).

![Figure 13: Have the films you have watched about Africa negatively affected how you view the continent?](image)

<table>
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<th>Region</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Don’t Know</th>
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<tr>
<td>North Africa</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Africa</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Africa</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Africa</td>
<td>46%</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>1%</td>
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</table>

Given that a small majority of respondents felt they were not influenced by negative narratives in media, we sought to understand whether this correlated with their feelings towards living on the continent (more than one option could be selected). The data revealed that 60% of respondents loved their country and the continent. At a regional level, East African respondents (67%) were most likely to say they loved their country and continent, but on a country level, Egyptian respondents (79%) were most likely to say this.

Despite West African respondents having said they were not influenced by negative stories about the continent, they were less likely to choose this option (56%) (see Figure 14); especially Ghanaians (44%). In addition, 36% of Western African respondents believed there are more opportunities elsewhere.

Overall, fewer than 20% of respondents wanted to live in the US or Europe, believed that there are fewer opportunities on the continent than elsewhere, or thought that they experienced a lower quality of life on the continent than they would elsewhere. At a country level, Moroccan respondents (29%), followed by Ghanaian and Nigerian respondents (27% each) were most likely to say they would rather live in the US or Europe.
Figure 14: How have your perceptions of Africa affected how you view the continent?

Given the influence of social media on respondents (see Section 3.2), we asked if they thought social media provided an opportunity for Africans to counter negative stereotypes. Most respondents (71%) believed Africans had the opportunity to counter negative narratives, and this view was common across all regions, varying between a low of 63% in North Africa and high of 75% in Southern Africa (see Figure 15). However, 50% of Egyptian respondents said they thought social media gave such an opportunity; 22% said it did not afford such opportunity, and 28% said they did not know. This implies that although most respondents felt enable and empowered to take up narrative-changing opportunities on social media, this was not the case for many Egyptian respondents.

Figure 15: Do you think that social media platforms provide Africans with an opportunity to counter negative stereotypes?

Like the findings in Section 3.2, the findings in this section point in the direction of narrative change.
4 NOTES ON THE FINDINGS

The influence of Western media – especially African American media – on African youth culture has long been established, especially in terms of music and clothing styles, and to some extent in fights against racism. However, the literature does not address how – and the extent to which – Western media influences African youths’ perceptions about the continent, identity as Africans, decisions to migrate to the US or Europe, and voting patterns. Further, the literature does not address the confluence of social influences on African youth in their locales, compared to the influences Western media and social media have on them. Even if Western media is influential, many young people still feel they have a specific African identity that cuts across country boundaries due a shared similar history.

Nevertheless, globally, youth are often “seen as positive social agents reflecting the historical and ongoing positioning of youth as social metaphor to changes in society and political economy” and this is especially so, given that Africa is the world’s most youthful continent. While many African youth do not vote, which could be argued as a show of disinterest in politics, they link digital and offline politics and are “highly motivated to participate in political activity, outside of electoral politics, often mobilising on a range of issues, particularly through the use of digital technology”.

Given the diversity of possible influences on any young person, this study sought to fill a gap in the literature by identifying factors that influence African youth today. Young Africans watch Western movies, and some argue “that cultural globalization is changing the faces of Africa at an alarming rate with profound negative consequences”. Although a large body of literature has examined how “youth have taken to digital technologies; especially social media, to articulate their social and political identities”, others argue that Western media technology moguls want to “dominate, control, and influence social, political and cultural discourse” in a way that suggests African youth on social media are being subjected to “algorithmic colonialism”. Our study suggests that digital technologies and Western media do influence youth, and the respondents in our study said such media created negative perceptions of Africa in the wider world. However, the respondents were more-or-less equally split on whether such media were influencing them to view Africa negatively.

As such, this data acknowledges that many young Africans – but not all – are being negatively affected by the Western media they consume. Despite this influence, respondents mostly felt love for their country and the continent; only 18% said they would rather live in the US or Europe and only 17% believed the quality of life was lower in Africa. As such, their perceptions of the continent were not being fully shaped by imported media.
The study found that respondents’ perceptions of the continent are still strongly influenced by their families and friends (44%), older people (45%) – albeit older people’s influence is fading (31%) – religion (74%), and cultural practices (54%). Therefore, we can see how “influence” is not composed of one thing, but a conglomeration of things held in tension.

The study suggests that, instead of being overly influenced by Western narratives, African youth use social media to assert social and political identities; 71% of respondents strongly believe they can use social media to challenge negative stories and stereotypes. Certainly, evidence suggests that, at a localised level, African youth exhibit “agency and resist the inbuilt dominant cultural narrative of apps created in Western contexts”

For example, under the hashtag #SomeoneTellCNN, Kenyans on Twitter (#KOT) humorously challenged CNN’s portrayal of “Kenya as a country in turmoil following an attack in Nairobi that killed six people”.

The virality of the hashtag led to CNN apologising, which shows the significant ability of Kenyans to challenge and critique the authority of international media.

On less weighty matters, but also deploying humour to step over digital divides and claim space as global citizens, African comedians such as Elsa Majimbo (Kenya) and Charity Ekezie (Nigeria) have secured international fame by either indirectly or directly and consciously mocking Western narratives

Similarly, the widespread #JerusalemaChallenge allowed people across the world to find hope during the Covid-19 pandemic – even though Western media predicted Africa would be the most hopeless continent in dealing with the pandemic

These examples back up the assertion of respondents in this study that Africa has a global influence (see Figure 12) – both on weighty political matters (such as portrayals of violence in African countries, and calls for decolonisation) and on popular culture.

However, even if respondents felt able to challenge negative narratives, such power should not be assigned to all young Africans; for example, a study of social media responses to a crackdown on Somalians in Nairobi found that “alternative and subversive narratives” that deviated from mainstream media reports were almost non-existent

Although Africans undertake “technological innovation and appropriation” and “localised campaigns...[can] swiftly reach international audiences” many attempts at counter narratives would only reach international audiences participating in overlapping internet bubbles, especially given that power and influence on social media are unequally distributed.

This call for a cautious response to the findings in the study is not an attempt to undercut optimism, but rather to acknowledge ongoing barriers to the influence African youth have on social media, alongside many reasons for hope. Perhaps the positive experiences of empowerment in the examples mentioned above are emboldening African youth to counter negative stereotypes (see Figure 15), and thus create more opportunities for counter narratives to flourish.
5 CONCLUSION

While arguing that Africa has global influence – especially South Africa, Nigeria and Egypt – respondents in this study acknowledged that negative stereotypes of Africa in mainstream media are prevalent and damaging to the continent, their countries, and sometimes even themselves. However, these stories and narratives were not the main influences on them; instead, they turned to popular culture, social media, their communities, their friends and families, religion and, to some extent, cultural practices to help them make decisions. In general, the only time they looked to politicians in their decision-making was when they are deciding who to vote for, and even then, North African respondents indicated that they were not influenced by anyone with respect to voting decisions. Further, the respondents felt they were able to challenge stereotypes on social media. Although this belief could be rooted in blind techno-optimism, examples discussed in previous research point to good reasons for optimism. As such, the research on influences on youth in this report points to the relevance of using popular culture and social media to shift narratives, while also being aware of other influences on young Africans today.
ENDNOTES

1 Rebecca Pointer and Sam Matsiko, ‘Climate Change in Africa: Are Africans Sleepwalking to Disaster?’, Data Analysis Briefing Series (Johannesburg, South Africa: Africa No Filter, March 2022), c.f.


LIST OF QUESTIONS

1. Do you believe that Africa has an influence on the world?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don't know

2. Which African country do you think has the most influence on the continent?
   a. South Africa
   b. Nigeria
   c. Ghana
   d. Egypt
   e. Kenya
   f. Ivory Coast
   g. Senegal
   h. Morocco
   i. Uganda
   j. Zimbabwe
   k. Don't know

3. What do you think influences African youth?
   a. US and Europe
   b. Pop culture
   c. Politicians
   d. Communities
   e. Don't know

4. What influences you the most?
   a. Politicians
   b. Family and friends
   c. Pop culture
   d. Social media
   e. Don't know

5. Do you think old people influence young Africans?
   a. Not anymore
   b. Yes
   c. Their influence is slowly fading
   d. Don't know

6. Does your religion have an influence on how you make your decisions and live your life?
   a. Yes
   b. No

7. Are you influenced by your community's cultural practices?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don't know

8. Who do you believe are the most influential people in your country?
   a. Politicians
   b. Musicians
   c. Influencers
   d. Business leaders

9. When voting in general or local elections, what influences your decision the most?
   a. Your family
   b. Your tribe
   c. Your friends
   d. Politicians' campaign approach
   e. None
   f. Don't know

10. What do you think are the dominant stories in movies about Africa?
    a. Africans in villages
    b. Crime and corruption
    c. Uneducated, unexposed Africans
    d. Naked natives
    e. Underdeveloped cities
    f. Don't know

11. How do you think these stories affect how the rest of the world views the African continent?
    a. It creates a negative perception
b. It doesn't affect how they view the continent
   c. Don't know

12. Have the films you have watched about Africa negatively affected how you view the continent?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don't know

13. How have your perceptions of Africa affected how you view the continent?
   a. I would prefer to live in the US or Europe
   b. I think there are fewer opportunities on the continent
   c. I think that we have a low quality of life on the continent
   d. I love my country and the continent

14. Do you think that social media platforms provide Africans with an opportunity to counter negative stereotypes?
   a. Yes
   b. No
   c. Don't know