Social Media in the Lives of Youth with Disabilities in Higher Education in Kenya: Agency, Inclusion and Aspirations

Thesis

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Wellbeing Education and Language Studies, The Open University, UK, for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Some of the content has been removed
Abstract

Following the 2018 Global Disability Summit in London and the call to ensure inclusive and equitable education for all, as prescribed in goal 4 of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), this study is timely and significant. It explores the lived experiences of social media usage by youth with disabilities in Higher Education in Kenya. Located within the wider social justice context and responses to disability within the Kenyan education system, the study uses Sen’s capability approach to understand what youth with disabilities value about their activities on social media and how this relates to their social and academic participation in Higher Education and aspirations in adulthood.

The study worked with seven youth with disabilities from three Universities in Nairobi. Using qualitative and participatory methods, the study argues that the capability approach enables a deep understanding of the different ways that these youth use and experience social media. In particular, it highlights that social media provides a significant space for youth with disabilities to develop their agency, which they then use to shift some offline social barriers so that they are able to pursue valued goals which have previously been inaccessible because of their individual conditions being restricted by the prevailing socially constructed barriers. Hence, these youth are seen to transform the inclusion space as they enter on their own terms without waiting to be included by society, as is often the norm. This is crucial for enhancing their voice and increasing their visibility in offline spaces within HE and, consequently, for their meaningful participation in life in adulthood.

The study concludes by suggesting grounds for re-thinking policy orientations on the inclusion of youth with disabilities within the education system.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the loving memory of my late mother Jane Gathoni Njenga (Mama Uji). Mami, you saw this coming long before I knew my left from my right. I am proud to be called your daughter.
Acknowledgements

Though my name appears on this thesis, there are many people who have significantly supported me behind the scenes. Without them this work would not have been possible:

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- I am grateful to the academic staff at the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language studies (WELS) and those from the Development Policy and Practice (DPP) who welcomed and cheered me on along the way.
- To my colleagues at WELS and DPP for the numerous occasions we met to share our work through seminars/work in progress sessions and emotional support with one another when the PhD journey seemed like an enormous and unachievable goal.
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- I am highly indebted to my loving family particularly auntie Mary (Tata Wanjiku) for stepping into my shoes and making sure that my children had someone to lean on during my long absences away from home; my lovely children Jane and Godwins for putting up with me when you really needed me most. I thank you and pray that God grants us a long life together.
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- To all the youth/co-researchers who worked with me as you shared your individual experiences and for allowing me to share them in this thesis, thank you!
- And finally, to my God, for all that He is to me.
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List of Acronyms

APDK  Association of the Physically Disabled of Kenya
AT    Assistive Technology
CA    Capability Approach
CHE   Commission for Higher Education
CAK   Communications Authority of Kenya
CCTV  Closed Circuit Television
CRC   Convention on the Rights of the Child
CRPD  Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities
DANIDA Danish Development Agency
DEO   District Education Officer
DPOS  Disabled People’s Organisations
DPP   Development Policy and Practice
EARC  Educational Assessment Resource Centre
EARS  Educational Assessment Resource Services
EFA   Education for All
FPE   Free Primary Education
GDPR  General Data Protection Regulation
GoK   Government of Kenya
GSMA  Groupe Speciale Mobile Association
HE    Higher Education
ICT   Information and Communications Technology
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>LCD</td>
<td>Leonard Cheshire Disability</td>
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<tr>
<td>KARI</td>
<td>Kenya Agriculture Research Institute</td>
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<tr>
<td>KCPE</td>
<td>Kenya Certificate of Primary Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>KCSE</td>
<td>Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>KSHS</td>
<td>Kenya Shilling</td>
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<tr>
<td>KICD</td>
<td>Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development</td>
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<td>KIE</td>
<td>Kenya Institute of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>KNEC</td>
<td>Kenya National Examinations Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>KNBS</td>
<td>Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics</td>
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<tr>
<td>KNSPWD</td>
<td>Kenya National Survey of Persons with Disabilities</td>
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<td>KUCCPS</td>
<td>Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Services</td>
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<td>MDG</td>
<td>Millennium Development Goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>MoE</td>
<td>Ministry of Education</td>
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<td>MoEST</td>
<td>Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
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<td>NYP</td>
<td>National Youth Policy</td>
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<td>OHCHR</td>
<td>Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights</td>
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<td>PWD</td>
<td>People with Disabilities</td>
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<td>PDA</td>
<td>Persons with Disabilities Act</td>
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<td>SAPs</td>
<td>Structural Adjustment Programmes</td>
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<td>SDG</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Goals</td>
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<td>SHAK</td>
<td>Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Kenya</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abbreviation</td>
<td>Full Form</td>
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<tr>
<td>SNE</td>
<td>Special Needs Education</td>
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<td>SRA</td>
<td>Strategic Research Areas</td>
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<td>TSC</td>
<td>Teachers Service Commission</td>
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<td>UDL</td>
<td>Universal Design for Learning</td>
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<td>UK</td>
<td>United Kingdom</td>
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<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<td>UNESCO</td>
<td>United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund</td>
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<td>USA</td>
<td>United States of America</td>
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<td>VSO</td>
<td>Voluntary Service Overseas</td>
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<td>WELS</td>
<td>Wellbeing Education and Language studies</td>
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<td>WHO</td>
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Chapter 1: Introduction

“I am here to get education not inclusion…I am no longer bothered, if someone doesn’t accept me that is their problem …I have gained confidence by seeing my friends’ and role models’ posts and pictures on Facebook”.

The quotation that serves as the introduction to this chapter was shared by Rukia\(^1\), one of the seven undergraduate youth with disabilities (YWD) in higher education (HE) in Kenya who participated in this study. We were in the middle of one of my interview sessions with her after a gruelling trek that had taken us almost one hour from her University, which is about half a mile away from her rental accommodation (see chapter 5 and 6). Besides being untarmacked, the road leading to her flat had big potholes and, on this particular day, it had rained heavily so we needed to take extra care with her wheelchair as we manoeuvred our way through the water filled potholes, including having to stop and wait repeatedly to give way to the many motorcycle taxis operating on the route. Ordinarily, her non-disabled peers would take about 20 minutes to walk the same distance. This was my third meeting with Rukia and I was following up to clarify a point about some of the challenges she had mentioned concerning ‘unwelcoming’ peers and how her activities on social media (Facebook and YouTube) were helping her gain confidence to pursue the things she values at the University despite such challenges.

Rukia’s sentiments echo various observations that have been made with regards to underrepresentation of YWD in HE in the country in general and persisting barriers for the few who make the transition to HE (e.g. Groce, 2016; Mugo Oranga and Singal, 2010; Opini, 2012). In her blog article, Groce (2016), who was the lead investigator in a study that examined “disability and development” in Kenya and three other African countries, observed the need for urgent research to establish the “systematic lack of inclusion of students with disabilities in higher education settings”, which she views as a lost opportunity (2016, December 02). The current study is an attempt to explore some of the issues affecting YWD and their participation in HE in the country. In particular, the study explores how YWD activities on social media might disrupt inequalities in their functioning achievements and allow them to fully participate in social and academic life in HE.

\(^1\) Rukia is a pseudonym. All names and other identifying information in this study have been changed to protect participants and institutions.
1.1 Research problem

Like their non-disabled peers, YWD in Kenya face challenges with regards to access to education, employment and social services; however, these challenges affect YWD in a far more complex way (Kett, 2012). For example, in education, disability related discriminations and stigma make it more difficult for them to access and participate fully in the same way as their non-disabled peers (Gathoni, 2014; Mugo et al., 2010). Studies show that of all youth in the country, YWD are the least educated as they rarely make the transition beyond Primary education (Global Monitoring Report (GMR), 2012; Groce, Kett, Carew, Lang & Delucca, 2018; Mugo et al., 2010). In terms of skills and training, the Kenya National Youth Policy (NYP) acknowledges that these youth are amongst the most marginalised and identifies them as a ‘top priority group’ (Section 9.1) (Government of Kenya (GoK), 2007a). Nonetheless, they are not mentioned anywhere in the policy’s ten objectives, which are aimed at ensuring that youth in the country are empowered with necessary competencies in readiness for entering the workplace. Because of these systematic marginalisations, YWD enter into adulthood with limited or no skills to support them take on adult roles in society with others (Mugo et al., 2010; Kett, 2012).

The government acknowledges these issues and has put in place several policies and interventions to ensure YWD and other marginalised groups are included both in education and other sectors (see chapter 2). Amongst them, is the National Information Communication and Technologies (ICT) policy (Republic of Kenya, (RoK) 2006) through which the government hopes to improve education, empower the youth and other marginalised groups, stimulate economic growth and promote social justice and equity, among other things. Whilst YWD are not clearly mentioned in this policy, this study assumes that they are represented in the ‘marginalised groups’. Because of this policy and other state-initiated measures, there has been a proliferation of internet services and cheap mobile phones in the country essentially making it possible for many youth in most parts of the country to engage on these media in various ways (Avis, 2015).

Survey data by the Communications Authority of Kenya (CAK) 2017 shows a high uptake of ICTs amongst youth aged between 18 and 30 years; many of them are said to be on social media, particularly Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and blogs (see chapter 3). Although research on social media in Kenya is just starting to grow, so far, the voice of YWD in these studies is missing (see chapter 3). It is therefore not possible to tell what their experiences are and what these media can enable them do or become. In the course of
my undertaking this study, the international non-governmental organisation (NGO) Leonard Cheshire Disability (LCD) has initiated a social media YWD led campaign called ‘2030 and Counting’ to monitor and report on the SDGs in Kenya, the Philippines and Zambia. In setting out the project in 2017, the LCD observed that YWD:

> Have the potential to be strong agents of change as they have the energy and idealism about the world they see around them. This is especially true with the increased use of social media and other Internet-driven tools for civic participation. (LCD, online)

These observations about YWD marginalisations in education, their agency and the potential of social media to increase their participation form part of the rationale for undertaking this research. The potential of social media in helping to break barriers and improve the student experience of some YWD in HE has been noted in various studies, though these have mainly been undertaken in the Global North\(^2\) (e.g. Lewthwaite, 2011; Seale, Draffan, & Wald, 2008; Seale, 2013; Söderström, 2013). However, this claim remains largely untested in the Global South, particularly in Kenya. Furthermore, many of these studies did not investigate social media per se. Some were interested in the types of social media and specialist assistive technologies (AT) students used (e.g. Ascuncion, Budd, Fichten, Nguyen, Barile & Amsel, 2012), students’ experiences of disability and social networks (e.g. Lewthwaite, 2011 & Söderström, 2009), strategies used by disabled students in HE to enable them benefit from technologies in general (Seale, et al., 2008) or digital capital of disabled students in HE (Seale, 2013). Although helpful in understanding the lives of YWD in HE, these perspectives do not provide a holistic evaluation of why YWD go online and hence it is difficult to assess the motivation for their being online, their agency on these media and the value of social media in their lives.

This is what I am interested in and is in line with Sen’s Capability Approach (CA) which is interested in the value for the individual, individual choice and agency (e.g. Sen, 2009; 1999); I use the CA to frame this study.

\(^2\) Throughout this study, I use the terms ‘Global North’ and ‘Global South’ instead of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries respectively as is commonly used in other literature. My decision is based on the observation that even rich countries are constantly in the process of development.
1.2 Study motivation

In addition to the above observations, this study is of interest to me because of my own background, skills and ideas of working with YWD in Kenya, where I come from. Prior to starting this PhD, I worked in various educational roles mainly in the area of special education as a teacher for over 11 years and special educational needs coordinator for six years. I have also lectured and assessed special educators and developed special education materials at the university. Additionally, I have researched on ‘Transitions of youth with disabilities in education in Kenya’ for my Masters’ degree in 2014. Overall, my main motivation of working in this area over the years is a longing to see YWD actualise their desires to be educated and participate in development equally with their non-disabled peers in society. This wish was ignited by the determination and resilience of the first class of YWD that I taught in my first posting in a rural part of the country where learning and environmental conditions were particularly challenging. Despite these challenges, many of them were always eager to learn and participate in co-curricular activities competitively with their non-disabled peers. All these have influenced the design and the methods used in this research in some ways, including the decision to work with YWD as co-researchers. Whilst this may have introduced a degree of subjectivity (see chapter 5), it has enabled me to gather rich insights regarding these youths’ lived experiences of social media usage as shown in the later chapters of this study. Further comments on the way my journey as a researcher interacts with the narrative and progress of the research is provided later in chapter 5 and the conclusion.

Clarification of terms

To begin this discussion, it is important to define the two key terms that I will use throughout this study namely, youth and disability.

Youth

There is not a universally accepted definition of youth; however, ‘youthhood’ is generally associated with transitions between childhood and adulthood (Dee, 2006; United Nations (UN), 2007). Age is one of its main defining characteristics and, according to the UN (1985), any young person between the ages of 15 and 24 years is considered a youth. The UN uses this for statistical consistency across regions, but it acknowledges that different member states may adopt different definitions. For this study, I define ‘youth’ as ‘anyone..."
aged between 15 and 30 years as provided in the NYP policy (Government of Kenya (GoK), 2007).

According to the policy, important biological, cultural, physical, psychological, political and social markers were taken into consideration to justify this categorisation (GoK, 2007). Whilst the age range provided in this policy is widely contested (see, Mugo, et.al, 2010; Muthee, 2010), in Kenya, the average age of undergraduate University completion ranges between 21 and 25 years - all my study participants were within this range. My preference to refer to them as youth is in line with the policy documents and motivated by the observation that youthhood is seen as an important entry marker to adulthood; it ‘implies change in status both in how we see ourselves as well as how others see us’ (Dee, 2006, p.8). The change is both personal and socio-economic in nature and comes with responsibility as one makes the transition from depending on others as a child, to independent living as an adult (Dee, 2006; UN, 2007). This focus is important for this study because it recognises that youth are active agents in making the process meaningful (UN, 2007) and aligns with Sen’s CA (e.g. 1990; 1999) which I am using to frame this study.

**Disability**

Disability is a relative and widely contested term which is affected by the ever changing political, legal and socio-cultural discourses both within and across countries (Crawford, 2012). Within disability studies, dominant debates differ on whether to define disability as an individual impairment (medical approach) or a restriction faced by a person with impairments because of social barriers (social model) (Barnes, 1992; Shakespeare, 2014). The former places disability within an individual, while the later shifts the focus to society (Oliver, 1990; 1996).

There are different versions of the social model, however: common amongst them is the emphasis on the disabling barriers in society which oppress and discriminate against people with disabilities (PWD) (Lang, 2001). Proponents of the social model criticise the medical approach for being narrow and prejudiced against PWD in the way it puts blame mainly on their individual conditions with little regard for the many barriers that exist in society - which give a normative view of the world where those who are seen not to fit are said to be the ‘problem’ which needs to be fixed (see, Oliver, 1990; 1996; Oliver & Barnes, 1998).
The social model of disability defines disability as “the disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by contemporary organisation which takes no or little account of people who have physical impairments and thus excludes them from the mainstream of social activities” (UPIAS, 1976: 3-4 (quoted in Lang, 2001, p.7). Advocates observe that by focusing on barriers in society and questioning the exclusion and marginalisation of PWD, the model has played a vital role in changing how disability is perceived and provided for both in the United Kingdom (UK), where it started, and internationally (Oliver & Barnes, 1998; Shakespeare 2014), including Kenya. Through the impacts of the social model, PWD feel empowered as they can now demand for their rights rather than on “the demeaning process of relying on charity or goodwill” (Shakespeare & Watson, 2015, p. 11). Nonetheless, the social model’s definition is also problematic because it fails to account for the effect of impairment in creating disability, hence, “the very success of the social model is now its main weakness” (Shakespeare & Watson, 2015, p. 11). Because of this, there have been calls for the need of a rethink of the social model’s approach (e.g. Shakespeare & Watson, 2015; Terzi, 2005; 2010).

This study takes up the challenge and proposes to use the CA’s definition of disability, which, in my view, is a more robust approach, particularly for this study which focuses on the ‘lived experiences’ of YWD in HE in the nuanced context of Kenya. Although the social model guides policy and provision in Kenya (see chapter 2), its failure to recognise the body’s (impairment) place/role in contributing to disability makes it inadequate for the current study. It does not help me understand these youths’ lives and the realities of their social context holistically. Further, as I will evidence in chapter 6, 7 and 8, through their activities on social media, participants in this study have gone beyond the ideals of the model; thus, I needed a more robust approach which would enable me to understand their individual lives, agency, aspirations and determination as observed in their data - hence the CA.

The CA was developed by the economist and philosopher Amartya Sen due to his dissatisfaction with the welfare economics approach to people’s standards of living in human development (Sen, 2009). He argues that income or ability to buy certain commodities is not an adequate measure of people’s wellbeing, and that there is more to life than these aspects (Sen, 2009). Instead, he argues for the need to understand individuals through the substantive freedoms (capabilities) and opportunities available to them to pursue the kind of life they value (Sen, 1999; 2009). Within the CA, disability is
said to occur when a person with impairment is deprived of opportunities and freedoms to achieve valued goals (Mitra, 2006). In this sense, the CA moves the disability debate from being an issue of location and an individual, to that of inclusion and equal provision for all and in this case, for YWD in HE (Mitra, 2006; Terzi, 2005). I use this definition and position my study within the wider social justice context and responses to disability within the education system in Kenya.

In addition to the above concepts, throughout this study I use *person-first terminology* (emphasis mine): that is, people with disabilities and youth with disabilities as used in Kenya’s Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA) (2003) and preferred within the disability movement in the country. The PDA came into place following an intense lobbying by PWD (Kamundia, 2016); thus, to honour their efforts, I will use PWD and YWD instead of disabled people or disabled youth as is often used in other international literature.

**1.3 Research aims and scope**

The primary aim of this study was to understand the lived experiences of social media use by undergraduate YWD, highlighting what they value about their activities on these media and what it (what they value) enables them to be/do as students in HE in Kenya. It sought to foreground the voice of YWD in research on social media in HE as they are currently not visible in the available studies in this area. My core concern here was the need to move beyond the common approaches in this area which look at how disability/ability is constructed and mediated on social media (e.g.Ascuncion, et al., 2012; Lewathwaite, 2011; Söderström, 2009).

As I mentioned earlier, the CA is a comprehensive approach that focuses not only on what an individual (YWD) has, but also on what the person is able to do or be, and the capabilities s/he has to pursue and actualise specific valued functionings. The CA acknowledges an individual’s diversity in terms of personal characteristics, social, cultural, political and economic contexts. In this study, the CA will be used to assess not only their access to social media but also their individual lives, specific context of HE and how it supports/hinders their being able to go online and pursue what they value as students in HE.

My emphasis in this study is not on generalisability, but on understanding the unique lived experiences of social media usage as narrated by a small group of YWD within HE.
through an in-depth participatory case study using the CA framework. In this way, I aim to give YWD voice to share their experiences and enable rich insights into what they value about their activities on these media and, in turn, how this might be enabling their capabilities and agency to participate in HE and to visualise the future they desire in adulthood.

Foregrounding YWD voices on social media in HE in Kenya is crucial in making them visible in offline spaces particularly in HE where they are underrepresented. Through the CA, the study provides significant insights into YWD agency. Through the activities that they choose to engage in online spaces, YWD gain new capabilities which they use to shift some offline social barriers that limit their ability to participate in these spaces (offline) equally with their non-disabled peers. In this way, these youth are seen to transform the inclusion space as they come in on their own terms without waiting to be included by others/society. This guarantees their process freedom to pursue other valued beings/doings; it also challenges the normative social perceptions which view YWD as needy or incapable of managing their lives. This is not accounted for in other approaches of disability.

By focusing on the process freedoms available through YWD activities on social media, the study provides space to assess YWD aspirations and the process through which these aspirations are formed in a way that is not possible in other approaches such as the social model, which is mainly concerned about the here and there of rights, with little room for YWD to shape their own future. This not only increases our understanding of aspirations but is also crucial in helping guide transition plans/programming for YWD post HE, particularly within the context of Kenya, where this is currently missing (see chapter 2).

I used innovative participatory methods, including social media maps, life histories, social media diaries and self-directed photography and worked with YWD as co-researchers to guide the planning and the data collection process. Besides being helpful in producing the rich insights that have ensued in this study, these methods have also created an empowering experience for the youth. By working with these youth, I wish to deepen the understanding of youth voice as participants’ show that they are choosing to exercise it as they want in ways similar to others. The 'voice' and the 'things they value' are related.

This study also has the potential to inform policy on inclusion in the wider education system in Kenya. It emphasises the need for including different groups of students in
decision-making process to ensure that their needs are appropriately provided for; this is crucial in realising equity and social justice for all students as articulated in the current inclusion policies in the country and in the SDGs to which Kenya is party.

1.4 Research questions

The study is guided by two research questions:

- What are the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in HE in Kenya?
- How does activity on social media influence YWD awareness of present and future possibilities of being in the world?

In the next section, I show how these questions are addressed.

1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This section presents an overview of the chapters in this thesis.

Chapter 2: The research context

Chapter 2 provides a contextual background of the study by critically examining the various policies, structures and institutions that influence the educational experiences of YWD and, in turn, how these relate to their lived experiences of social media use in HE in Kenya. Next, I look at the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and digital technologies in education in general and, finally, discuss youth and their use of ICTs/digital technologies in the country.

Chapter 3: Literature review

In chapter 3, I review relevant literature, starting with the development of the internet and social media, showing how it became a regular part of youth’s lives globally. Following this, I focus on the broader understanding of the literature on social media and its use by youth generally - that is, those with and without disabilities - so as to position the social media experiences of YWD in HE. I then key in on the specific situation of Kenya where this study took place, critically examining the nature of the context in which YWD use and experience social media. Finally, I establish the gap in the existing literature and conclude with the research questions that guided the study.
Chapter 4: Conceptual framework

Chapter 4 builds on the discussion of the capability approach as introduced in chapter one. Here, I present and critically show why I adopted the CA in this study and how it aligns to disability, education and social media discourses. I then detail the key concepts of the CA that relate to this study showing how these will be used later in the analysis in chapters 7 and 8.

Chapter 5: Methodology

In this chapter, I outline the methodological approach and situate the study within an interpretative research paradigm, showing how it aligns with my goal of keeping people at the forefront of the design considerations. I go on to describe how the three universities were selected and how the study participants were recruited. I then explain how the empirical data collection drew on participatory methods, including conversational interviews, social media maps, life history interviews, a self-directed photography project and social media diaries, in order to foreground the voices of YWD. Following this, I explain how the data was analysed in line with the CA, the ethical considerations and the study limitations.

Chapter 6: Youth with disabilities’ participation on social media: YWD perspectives

Chapter 6 is the first of the data analysis chapters. It responds to the first research question and provides in depth-descriptions of how individual and contextual factors influence YWD activities on social media. In doing so, the chapter foregrounds the voices of the seven students who took part in the study. The chapter is divided into two key sections. In the first one, I explore the individual lives of each of the seven YWD, showing their educational journey. I then turn to their individual lived experiences of social media usage in HE and highlight their specific activities on social media and why they value these activities. This is presented under different themes according to individual data. The findings in this chapter lay an important foundation for the analysis that follows in chapters 7 and 8.

Chapter 7: Why YWD value social media in HE: Personal and Contextual factors

This chapter focuses on the different experiences of YWD so as to make sense of why they value what is enabled through their activities on social media and how this relates to their
current participation in HE and aspirations post HE. This is the main analysis chapter and it answers the second research question. I explain the five common themes (capabilities) that emerged following the analyses as guided by the data in chapter 6 and the CA framework outlined in chapter 4. The analyses provide insights into YWD agency, the choices they make with regards to their activities on social media and why they make these choices, and the conversation factors that enable/hinder the actualization of what they value in relationship to their aspirations.

*Chapter 8: Synthesis of findings*

In this chapter I draw together the different strands that constitute the thesis. The first section presents the overarching analysis of the key findings showing what YWD studying in HE value about their use of social media and how this influences their agency to participate in social and academic life in HE and, in turn, how it relates to their aspirations post HE. The contribution of the CA in highlighting these findings is also shown. The second section focuses on the empirical, methodological and theoretical contributions in the area of YWD, social media and HE. Finally, I consider the limitations of using the CA to understand YWD’s lived experiences of social media in HE.

*Chapter 9: Reflections and Conclusions*

Chapter 9 concludes the study. It summarizes the key findings showing its relevance in the wider context of inclusion and social justice in response to disability issues in the education sector in Kenya. I offer suggestions on how the empirical and theoretical contributions of the study can be used by policy makers and practitioners working in the area of YWD and education. I also reflect on the methodology and the research questions showing how other researchers can build on them. I conclude by outlining the main learning points, limitations of the research and suggest future research areas.
Chapter 2: The Research Context

In this chapter, I present the context in which the study took place. My aim is to provide a detailed overview of the policies, structures, and institutions that shape YWD educational experiences and show how these relates to their lived experiences of social media use in HE in Kenya. I begin by presenting the general demographics of PWD in the country. I go on to discuss the inclusive education trajectory in the country and show how this is influenced by international policies and treaties. Next, I look at the structure and management of education, from primary through to HE, highlighting the contribution and challenges with the system regarding participation for YWD. In addition, I consider the role of NGOs in the education system. I then highlight the use of ICT and digital technologies in education with a focus on youth and their use of ICTs/digital technologies. Finally, I conclude the chapter by highlighting the gaps in the existing literature thereby establishing the need for the current research.

2.1 The demographics of people with disabilities in Kenya

Currently, there is a lack of reliable data on PWD in Kenya. Estimates from the 2009 national census shows that of the approximately 40 million people in the country, 3.25% (about 1.3 million) were said to be living with disabilities (Kenyan National Bureau of Statistics, KNBS, 2010). But the Kenya National Survey of Persons with Disabilities (KNSPWD, 2008) shows a slightly higher number, 4.6% which is equivalent to around 1.6 million PWD. The survey notes this was a conservative figure since the questions were only asked to ‘conventional households’ and only targeted the traditional areas (physical, visual, hearing, speech and mental) of disabilities (KNSPWD, 2008).

Still, both figures are considerably below the World Health Organization’s (WHO, 2011) projections which show that disability affects 15% of every population internationally which in this case equates to over 6 million people. However, the report cautions that the stated prevalence “should not be taken as definitive but as reflecting the current knowledge and available data” (p.25). Further, the report notes, the prevalence rates reported by many countries in the Global South were lower compared to the Global North “because they collect data on a narrow set of impairments, which yield lower disability prevalence estimates” (p.25). This inconsistency and underestimation of PWD data is said to contribute to the endemic problems with policy making, planning and provision for PWD.

3 The is the most recent census.
in these contexts (see, Global Monitoring Report (GMR), 2012; Mitra, Posarac, & Vick, 2011; & WHO, 2011). Other analyses show that most of the surveys used to collect data rarely reach some parts of the country and that data on disability are not considered important and thus not kept (see, Groce, Kett, Carew, Lang & Delucca, 2018; Mugo et al., 2010). A majority of PWD are said to live in rural areas where poverty is generally high. A multidimensional analysis of poverty in 15 countries in the Global South by Mitra et al. (2011) showed that in Kenya, PWD were amongst the poorest in the country, representing around 67% of the population, compared to 57% of those without disability—showing a 10% difference and the highest across the countries surveyed. In the rural areas where PWD and others—nearly three-quarters of Kenya’s population—live, subsistence farming is the main source of livelihood (KNBS), 2010. The rural and subsistence nature of the economy is a key driver of high poverty rates.

The KNSPWD (2008) survey observed that HE was an important mitigating factor for the few PWD who earned a steady income. But this was the exception rather than the norm as a significant number of PWD had no education beyond primary schooling. Government records on HE and training for PWD are scant and conflicting. For example, the country’s report to the Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (OHCHR, 2011) shows that overall, only 2% of PWD had accessed HE at the time. The report did not have a demographic breakdown of PWD. Other analysis shows that only 0.7% PWD in Kenya have some form of higher education (see, Kochung, 2011). A lack of HE qualifications coupled with the stigma that is attached to disability in most parts of the country and their rural residence as shown earlier, highly reduces PWD’s chances of earning a living, hence their high levels of poverty (Mitra et al., 2011).

The exact number of YWD (ages 15-24 years) is not clear but their population is the highest amongst all groups of PWD in the country and constitutes approximately 3.6% of the entire population (KNSPWD, 2008; GMR, 2012). Moreover, the numbers are projected to rise significantly due to the numerous risk-taking behaviours associated with ‘youthhood’ such as experimenting with drugs, their role in political and electoral violence, as was observed in the 2017 elections, where many youth were left with severe injuries which will affect the rest of their lives (Daily Nation, 9/10/2017) and better healthcare, which makes it possible for people with severe disabilities to survive beyond childhood, albeit with a disability (Groce & Kett, 2014).
Little is known about the situation of YWD as there is scarce research explicitly focusing on them (Gathoni, 2014). A concerted needs analysis on transitions of YWD in the country using government records and findings from the few available studies paints a dismal picture of these youth in education, training, employment and social participation (Mugo et al., 2010). Generally, YWD are among the least educated in the country, the majority hardly transition beyond primary education (GMR, 2012; Groce, et al., 2018 & Mugo et al., 2010). Consequently, they miss out on essential skills, training and development acquired in HE and crucial for taking a full and active role in society (Kett, 2012). In a country with limited social security, this means that in their adulthood these youth will continue relying on their families and, thus, negatively affect household resources and the country’s economy (Mitra et al., 2011). This perpetuates their invisibility as a distinct group and diminishes their ‘voice’ in policy and decision making in other areas key to their development. Despite the low numbers of YWD reaching HE, Kenya has numerous policies and laws supporting inclusive education for all as discussed next.

2.2 Trajectory of Inclusive Education policies and practices in Kenya

Formal educational provision for PWD in Kenya was started by church missionary societies during the British rule and it mainly aimed at rehabilitating returning wounded soldiers (Ministry of Education, (MoE), 2008). Initial programmes were set in Thika near Nairobi to rehabilitate blind men. This would later become Thika School for the blind in 1960, the first institution to offer formal education to blind children in the country. It was shortly followed by Joytown Special School for the physically disabled, also in Thika. More such schools would later open in different parts of the country. These missionaries were also responsible for training teachers whom they later absorbed into the special schools. Notably, as in many other international contexts at the time, for example the United Kingdom (UK), the charity and medical models of disability were dominant, thus, focus was on impairments and the corresponding care and/or rehabilitation required in addition to vocational skills (Oliver, 1990). Minimal academic education was offered as these children were deemed not capable of the same (MoE, 2009). After independence in 1964, and with the gradual departure of missionaries, the government took over and continued offering similar services, mainly to four categories of children including those with mental, physical, hearing and visual disabilities as defined by the MoE (2009).

Since then, efforts towards the inclusion of children and YWD in education have witnessed significant milestones both in structure and content. The reforms have been informed by
policy and legislation through various commissions and reports formed by successive governments in response to the country’s needs at particular times. Here, I discuss five commissions whose recommendations have had significant influence on education policy and practices for YWD namely: the Ominde Commission of 1964, the Gachathi Report of 1976, the Kamunge Report of 1988, the Koech Report of 1999, and the Kochung Report of 2003.

The Kenya Education (Ominde) Commission of 1964 (Republic of Kenya (RoK), 1964) was not only the first commission of education after the colonial rule, but also a significant one as it sought to reform the system and make it responsive to the needs of independent Kenya. Its main focus was the removal of the racially segregated schooling established by the British colonial government, replacing it with integrated education based on the values and aspirations of a united Kenya (MoE, 2009). It recommended the setting up of the then Kenyan Institute of Education (KIE), currently the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD), to guide the development of curriculum in the country and the setting up of pre-service and in-service training for all teachers in primary schools (RoK, 1964). With regards to the education of YWD, the commission addressed the government’s role in the coordination and improvement of service, quality and delivery strategies in the disability sector. It also recommended that children with mild disabilities be integrated in regular schools to learn with their non-disabled peers (Republic of Kenya, 1964). Though seen to respond to the needs of YWD, the recommendations were not fully implemented (Mugo et al., 2010). Further, as mentioned earlier, by this time, children and YWD were still provided for in special schools wholly run by church missionary societies.

The Gachathi Report of 1976 addressed the need for:

i) setting up assessment centres in the country for early co-ordination of intervention and ease of assessment of disabled students;

ii) the public to be sensitized on the causes of disabilities so as to help promote prevention;

iii) increased research to determine the nature and extent of impairments; and

iv) the development of policy for integrating disabled students (MoE, 2009).
With assessment, the government hoped that YWD would receive early intervention. It is through the recommendations of this commission that the government, with the support of the Danish Development Agency (DANIDA), in 1984 established Educational Assessment Resource Centres (EARC) in the original 47 district education offices in the country to undertake (i) and (ii) above (MoE, 2009). However, even with early assessments, the medical model of disability, with its emphasis on impairments (Oliver, 1999), was still predominant. Consequently, YWD continued to be placed in special schools, which were thought to have specialised resources to train and care for them. Since the withdrawal of support by DANIDA in 1998, the ability of EARC to continue providing assessment services has significantly reduced mainly because of funding issues and understaffing (Elder, Damiani & Oswago, 2016; Kiarago, 2015).

The Kamunge Report of 1988 (MoE, 1988) emphasized the deployment of Special Needs Education (SNE) inspectors at the district level to assess curriculum implementation in special schools. Coming during a period of economic difficulties and the structural adjustments programmes (SAPs) instituted by international donors, the government initiated a cost-sharing policy between the government and parents, to help implement these recommendations and others within the education sector. Whilst the recommendation aimed to supplement government’s funding and enhance educational standards in the SNE sector, it had a negative effect on many YWD, whose parents lacked the required finances to support their education, thus many of them remained at home. A task force survey on education status from the year of this report, 1988 to 1999, shows a poor picture of the SNE sector with over 90% (about 90,000) children—aged between 6-13 years—out of school, of which only 12% had been assessed (Government of Kenya (GoK), 2000; Mugo et.al., 2010). The estimates for YWD were not given.

Following these findings, came the Koech Report of 1999 (RoK, 1999). It acknowledged a lack of comprehensive SNE policy and legal framework and recommended the establishment of a national special education advisory board to advise the government. In addition, it observed the need for an education that would ensure accelerated industrial and technological development, life-long learning and adaptations in education in response to changing circumstances, including looking at the special educational needs of children and YWD, and ways of increasing their participation in day-to-day activities (RoK, 1999).

Apart from the creation of the SNE advisory board at the Ministry of Education, many of the other recommendations were shelved as the economy was still in decline. Priority was
given to educational programs which would ensure stimulation of the economy (RoK, 1999), SNE was not one of them (Mugo et al., 2010).

Nonetheless, these recommendations were key to the formation of the Kochung Task Force of 2003 on inclusive education (MoE, 2003). Instituted soon after the introduction of Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003, the Commission advised on the need for:

i) Training and in-service of teachers for children with Special Needs

ii) Strengthening Educational Assessment and Resource Centres through increased budgetary allocation and equipment.

iii) Carrying out a special needs national survey to establish the population of children with special needs in and out of school and an inventory of assistive devices and equipment available in schools.

iv) All schools to be made barrier free to enhance access (MoE, 2009, p. 14).

In addition to the above commissions, there are specific policies guiding provision in the area of SNE. This includes the National Special Needs Education Policy (SNE) (2009) which defines inclusive education as, “an approach in which learners with disabilities and special needs, regardless of age and disability, are provided with appropriate education within regular schools” (Republic of Kenya, 2009 p.5). Among other things, the policy acknowledges high pupil to teacher ratio, insufficient number of trained special education teachers, stigma and discrimination, limiting and rigid examinations and inadequate supervision and monitoring of SNE programmes as contributing to the inability of YWD to participate fully in education. To ensure inclusion, the policy states that the ministry shall, “enforce for equal access and inclusion for persons with special needs and disability in education and training programmes at all levels” (p.16). A policy analysis conducted in a recent large-scale research on girls with disability led by the LCD notes that the policy lacks the action plan crucial for implementation and does not specify formal regulations on assessment and intervention procedures (Khaemba, Kariuki & King’iri, 2016).

The Policy Framework for Education and Training (2012) provides broad policy guidelines on the right to education, focusing on access and inclusion all aimed at the equalisation of opportunities for marginalised groups, including YWD, by means of measures such as affirmative action to redress historical injustices (emphasis mine), a
review of the curriculum, enhancing capacity for teacher training in SNE and support for research to guide provision (Republic of Kenya, 2013). Affirmative action provides a 5 percent rule which reserves placement opportunities for these youth in all institutions of HE where they might be left out because of the highly standardized exams (Republic of Kenya, 2013). For example, YWD are granted automatic entry into HE with a minimum grade of C+ in KCSE; it is through this provision that some of the few YWD in HE manage to secure placements (see chapter 6). A policy analysis on the right to inclusive HE for PWDs in Kenya notes that affirmative action, as outlined in this document and the constitution, has significantly contributed to the promise for YWD’s inclusion although they are still disproportionately left out (Kamundia, 2016). The analysis did not provide any data to substantiate the findings. Other analysis criticizes the policy for not being specific in terms of budgetary allocation and how to implement and enforce the said provisions (Khaemba et al, 2016). Consequently, it becomes challenging for most YWD to remain in education beyond primary school (Elder et al., 2016; Groce, et al., 2018).

Further provisions are in the Basic Education Act No. 14 of 2013 (Republic of Kenya, 2013a) which was developed to guide basic education provision in the country in line with the new Constitution which was effected in 2010 (discussed later in this section) and the devolved system of government introduced in 2013. According to paragraph 42 of this Act: “The (education) system shall be so structured as to enable learners to access education and training at any level in a sequence, and at a pace that may be commensurate with the individual learner’s physical, mental and intellectual abilities and the resources available”. (Republic of Kenya, 2013a). The Act established the National Education Board to advise the Cabinet Secretary on education related matters in the country and County Education Boards (CEB) for each of the 47 counties tasked with the responsibility of ensuring equal education provision for all at the county level. Some of the provisions that are specific to children and YWD in the Act are shown in Table 2.1.
Table 2.1: Some of the provisions for children and YWD in the Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic of Kenya, 2013)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section 44(1)</th>
<th>Establish and maintain public special schools</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Section 44(2)</td>
<td>Provide special needs education in special schools established under (1) or in pre-primary, primary and secondary schools suitable to the needs of a pupil requiring special education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section 44(4)</td>
<td>Ensure that every special school or educational institution with learners with special needs is provided with appropriately trained teachers, non-teaching staff, infrastructure, learning materials and equipment suitable for such learners</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Section 45(2) | a) Prescribe the duration of primary and secondary education suitable to the needs of a pupil pursuing special needs education  
                      b) Provide for the learning and progression of children with special needs through the education system |
| Section 46(1) | Subject to the Constitution and the provision of this Act, it shall be the duty of every County Education Board in consultation with the relevant County government to provide for education, assessment and research centres, including a special needs service in identified clinics in the county |

Whilst the Act is said to be driven by equality and non-discrimination, in its current state, the Act appears to be moving ‘one step forward and two steps back’, particularly because of its inclination towards special schools as opposed to inclusive education as provided in the SNE policy discussed earlier (Aseka & Kanter, 2014). For example, it is not clear why the Act—section 44(1)—continues to promote the *establishment of special schools* and what it implies by, “pre-primary, primary and secondary *schools suitable* “(section 44(2) (emphasis mine) to the needs of students with special needs, yet the SNE policy states that all schools should be inclusive.
Although it is acknowledged that special schools are still crucial, especially for students with severe disabilities, provisions such as these might contribute to YWD being denied admission to secondary schools of their choice despite having excelled in the highly standardized exams (see chapter 6).

In addition to the above policies, the right to education is safeguarded in other general policy and legislations which guide provision for PWD in the country such as the Persons with Disabilities Act (PDA) of 2003 and the Constitution of Kenya (2010). The PDA is the main disability policy document and, in drafting it, the government recognizes disability as a development issue (Khaemba et al., 2016). It covers rights, rehabilitation and the need for equal opportunities for PWD, and prohibits all manner of discrimination. Coming in soon after the onset of Free Primary Education (FPE) in 2003, the Act has helped in the enhancement of PWD’s access to education. It stipulates that, “no person or learning institution shall deny admission to a person with disabilities, to any course of study by reason only of such disability, if the person has the ability to acquire learning in that course” (Section 18). Nonetheless, reports of students being denied enrolment in schools of their choice are still rampant (see, Mugo et al., 2010 & Opini, 2012).

The PDA also requires learning institutions to make necessary accommodations for PWD taking into account their specific needs. But the language used in some sections of the Act does not address education as a human rights issue and instead uses terms such as “provision of assistance to students with disabilities…help with scholarships and fee subsidies…” (emphasis mine) all of which reflect the charity approach. Such an approach makes it difficult for YWD to demand for rights when denied and thus consequently missing out on opportunities. Analyses have criticized the effectiveness of the Act mainly for a lack of enforcement procedures and being unclear on inclusive education as provided in the SNE policy of 2009 (e.g. Kett, 2012; Khaemba et al., 2016). Moreover, as the Act is not harmonized and re-aligned to the Constitution and Vision 2030 (Government of Kenya’s blue-print for development), full implementation remains a challenge (Kamundia, 2016; Khaemba, et.al, 2016).

The Constitution of Kenya (2010) recognises the rights of PWD in the country. Mandates regarding the treatment of PWD, their access to institutions, information and infrastructural communications are provided. Chapter four (Bill of Rights), upholds the right to free and
compulsory education and ‘access to educational institutions and facilities for people with disabilities that are integrated into society, to the extent compatible with the interests of the person’ (p.37).

Additionally, Article 55 (a) commits the state to implement measures, including affirmative action, to ensure PWD access relevant education and training to redress historical disadvantages. Enforcement mechanisms are also outlined although they lack clarity on consequences for those who fail to oblige. Analyses show that the passing of the above policies is often as a result of external pressure on the state to conform to international frameworks and norms (e.g. Elder, 2015; Opini, 2012). Whilst the need to uphold the rights of PWD is fundamental, such influences often make the state oblige despite not having the capacity and required resources to undertake the same (Elder, 2015). Notable international and regional frameworks to which Kenya is a signatory include: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UN-CRC, 1989), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), the Salamanca Statement and Frameworks for Action on Special Needs Education (1994), the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) now SDGs, Education for All (EFA) and the Conventions on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) (2006). The convention calls upon state parties to recognize PWD’s right to education and provide inclusive education system at all levels on the basis of equal opportunity. Collectively, these legislations confer the rights of YWD to inclusive education and the government’s commitment to ensuring the same. Nevertheless, YWD full inclusion into education still remains unrealized particularly in HE where this research focuses. To exemplify this, I discuss the education system, highlighting some of the key issues affecting the inclusion of YWD.

2.3 The Education System

In line with the Constitution of Kenya 2010, the country was devolved after the 2013 elections and is currently under a two-tier governance system: that is, a central government at the helm led by an elected President and 47 County governments at the lower level, each led by an elected County governor. Nonetheless, education remains largely a function of the national government (MoE & MoEST, 2012). County governments are only responsible for early childhood education, childcare facilities and village polytechnics.
The Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (MoEST) is in charge of education under the leadership of the Cabinet Secretary. It is broadly divided into three state departments namely: Basic Education, Vocational and Technical Training and University (Higher) Education (MoE & MoEST, 2012). These are further divided into directorates charged with various aspects of education within the three departments.

The Basic Education Act of 2013 established the National Education Board to advise the Cabinet Secretary on education provision in the country and 47 County Education Boards (CEB) to coordinate and monitor education provision at the County level on behalf of the central government (Republic of Kenya, 2013). The boards comprise of a chairperson and 12 other members all appointed by the Cabinet Secretary. County Directors of Education and Sub-County Education officers (formerly District Education Officers) manage the day-to-day education implementation at the county level as delegated by the Cabinet Secretary. Although the MoEST is responsible for training teachers, all other aspects of teacher management and remuneration are under the Teachers Service Commission (TSC), an independent government commission established under the new constitution for the said roles. Secondary and Primary schools are administered by boards of management which are responsible for the implementation of policies from the central government under the guidance of headteachers (Republic of Kenya, 2013). Most schools are public (government sponsored) while some are privately owned by individuals and faith-based organisations. Figure 2.1 illustrates the current school system.
2.3.1 The School system

Presently, the country follows the 8-4-4 system of education where students attend eight years of primary school, four in secondary school and at least four at university. Students who do not make the qualification to university can apply for vocational and technical training. Primary education is free and compulsory, but all other levels are not. At the end of primary and secondary education, students undertake standardised national examinations—the Kenya Certificate of Primary Education (KCPE) and the Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) — both of which are administered centrally by the Kenya National Examinations Council (KNEC) (MoE, 2009). Primary schools are required to admit students within their local areas even though this is often not the case for students with disabilities as shown below. Admission into secondary education is dependent on a student’s performance in KCPE (MoE, 2009). Currently, there are initiatives to move to a new system which includes pre-primary and splits secondary education -- in line with the SDGs (Abuya, 2017).

Figure 2.1: Figure showing the current school system in Kenya
The introduction of FPE in 2003 was a significant milestone for many children and YWD, who for a long time were left out of education. Prior to this, a government survey on the situation of education in the country shows only 14,614 (less than 2%) were enrolled in special schools and integrated programs that provided for them at the time, compared to the over 7.2 million non-disabled peers in education during the same period (GoK, 2007; Mugo et. al., 2010). As per this survey, the chances of these students (assessed or not) getting admission to any education institution at the time were minimal and thus continued being denied their right to education which in effect reduces their chances of equal participation in life with others later in adulthood. Estimates for YWD in secondary education and those attending vocational training at the time were extremely low, around 1,431 in total (Mugo et al, 2010). No estimates were given for those in HE.

A positive shift has, however, been observed since the onset of FPE in 2003. By the end of that year, approximately 161,825 primary aged students with disabilities were said to be receiving education in various institutions that provided for them (MoE, 2009). Of these, 23,459 were in special primary schools while 128,940 were enrolled in integrated settings with their non-disabled peers (MoE, 2009). Transition to special secondary education was still low but the numbers had increased to about 7,026. No data on those in inclusive secondary was given. Other analyses shows that overall, only 9% made the transition to secondary school (Mugo et al., 2010) which compares poorly to the 59% of their non-disabled peers in the same year (Oketch & Somerset, 2010). In addition, a total of 2,400 YWD were said to be enrolled in special technical/vocational training for skills development. Although there was no explanation on the types of training they were undertaking, from my personal experience in the field usually, the vocational training is provided to YWD who do not qualify for secondary education and/or those who are past primary school going age. This upward trend towards inclusion has been ongoing although, as seen, much of it is still concentrated within primary school. Furthermore, the Draft Education Policy of (2012) observes that while enrolment is increasing, the estimates represent roughly one-third of the expected number of students with disabilities. Other analyses show that the data is unreliable and highlighted the need for a tracking system to establish the real situation of these students in the country (Elder et al, 2016; Groce, 2016 & Mugo et al., 2010).

Notable too is that being female increases further exclusion as one progresses to high levels of education. For example, out of the 7,026 YWD who were in secondary school,
only 536 were girls while the rest 6,490 were boys (MoE, 2009). Unsurprisingly, this is common in Kenya where education is conceptualised as an economic investment, crucial for escaping poverty (Odhiambo, 2016; Oketch, 2019). In this setting therefore, such investment is often made on those for whom it is assumed the return will be high, in this case boys/men (Odhiambo, 2016; Opini, 2012). Since girls/women are expected to marry and take care of household chores, less is spent on them (Opini, 2012). It is worse for girls/women with disabilities as they are considered unable to engage in the normal female responsibilities, making their chances of being educated extremely low (Deluca, Carew, & Kett, 2017; Opini, 2012). Accordingly, it becomes difficult for them to engage in development on equal footing with their male peers in adulthood. This scenario is increasingly being debated in the country (see; Elder & Folley, 2015; Deluca, et al., 2017; Ingstad & Grut, 2007; Mugo et al., 2010 & Opini, 2012).

Obstacles for YWD inclusion in education are numerous. Although FPE opened the doors of access, it also created new forms of exclusion for YWD. Analyses shows that schools were not prepared for these ‘new’ students and many teachers lack necessary skills to teach them (Elder et al., 2016; Gathumbi, Ayot, Kimemia & Ondigi, 2015). In their mixed-method study on “teachers’ and administrators’ preparedness to work with students with special needs in inclusive education” in various schools within Nairobi, Gathumbi et al. (2015) found that an overwhelming majority (88%) of teachers in regular schools did not have pedagogical knowledge and skills to teach these students, received little assistance from ministry officials to support their practice and lacked the necessary resources needed for the same. Combined with the increasingly large class sizes, with ratios of up to 40 pupils per one qualified teacher (Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS), 2017) and the pressure to achieve the required mean standard scores in the national examinations, it becomes extremely challenging for teachers to provide for the individual learning needs of YWD (Elder et al., 2016). Thus, with little access to the curriculum, which in itself is highly non-inclusive, these youth start “falling through the cracks of the education system” (Mugo et al, 2010, p.10).

Where curriculum is adjusted—as is the case with the Kenyan sign language—development of materials often takes long (MoE, 2009; Mugo et al, 2010). As a result, YWD are always lagging behind their non-disabled peers in terms of curriculum coverage (Deluca et al., 2017; Elder & Foley, 2015). Some adaptations are provided - for example, extra time during exams normally between 30-45 minutes. These are applied equally and
not specific to the individual needs of YWD (Deluca et al., 2017; Elder & Foley, 2015). Sufficient resources and individualised support are crucial for enhancing YWD’s ability to participate equally in learning with their non-disabled peers. Currently, no matter their location, all YWD whether in regular or special primary schools receive a standard funding of KSHS 3,020 (approximately £25) compared to KSHS 1,020 (about £12) given to their non-disabled peers annually (MoEST, 2014a). While the additional funding is acknowledged, the standardised way in which this is done is problematic and has been criticized for not accounting for the relative needs of some pupils and schools (UNESCO-IIEP, 2014). Firstly, it gives an impression that YWD are a homogeneous group whose needs require uniform provision. Undoubtedly, this is not the case. Like any other population, YWD are diverse in many ways. They differ from each other not only in the type of their impairments but also in their gender, social and cultural contexts, all which require varying resources and support (Terzi, 2010; 2005). Secondly, it creates a picture that provision for YWD is expensive. For example, from the above figures, it can be argued that providing for one YWD is equivalent to that of two non-disabled peers. Whilst it is true that the nature of some impairments require more funding to enable YWD to perform equally with their non-disabled peers, not all of them do (Terzi, 2010; 2008). Therefore, uniform funding as highlighted suggests a lack of understanding of these heterogeneities and their corresponding needs. Disability writers caution that such an approach only serves to exacerbate the inequalities faced by YWD (Groce & Kett, 2014; Miles, 2012; Singal, 2010; Terzi, 2010).

Hence, many YWD miss out on opportunities for secondary education. Even the few who qualify rarely get the opportunity to study in schools of their choice. Since admission is related to performance in the highly standardized KCPE, only the best performers get access to the top performing well-resourced national and regional schools (Ochieng, 2016; Oketch, 2019). Most YWD options are thus limited to either poorly resourced local secondary schools or special secondary boarding schools, where conditions are similar to those of their former primary schools as shown earlier (Mugo et. al., 2010). Recent findings from the LCD study shows that transition is still difficult because of lack of inclusive education approach, physical barriers and teachers’ limited knowledge, skills and negative attitudes (LCD, 2017).

Moreover, unlike FPE, secondary education is not free and although the government subsidizes the tuition fee, attendance costs are still substantially high for most families
(Ndiku & Lucy, 2013; UNICEF, 2017). Currently, all day schools charge KSH. 9,374 (approximately £71) per student, boarding schools charge KSHS. 53,553 (about £408) and KSHS. 37,210 (about £283)\(^4\) for special needs secondary schools per year (MoEST, 2015). In addition, while releasing this fees guideline, the then Cabinet Secretary of education called upon parents to continue paying other extra levies:

I want to state that it is the responsibility of every parent to ensure that their children attend school and meet their parental obligations including paying any approved levies as provided for at section 29 (2) (b) of the Basic Education Act 2013… Levies for on-going approved infrastructure and school transport projects will continue. (MoEST, 2015, p.6).

Studies show that the said levies are often exorbitant, and beyond the reach of most parents and guardians (Abuya & Mutisya, 2018; Ndiku & Lucy, 2013; Oketch & Somerset, 2010; UNICEF, 2017). Considering that the majority of YWD come from poor backgrounds (Groce et al., 2018; KNSPWD, 2008; Mitra et al., 2011), access is thus further hindered by their inability to find the required fees. A report by UNESCO (2012) observes that stringent entrance examinations, tuition costs and proximity of schools contribute highly to the exclusion of the already marginalised in the country. Under such circumstances, opportunities for YWD to progress to HE become evidently low and create a vicious circle generation after generation. This can be viewed as an educational injustice against these youth.

### 2.3.2 Special Needs Education

Segregated special (primary and secondary) schooling that caters for students with similar impairments is still prevalent in Kenya (MoE, 2009). As discussed above, for many YWD, this may be the only option either because of a lack of placement in schools of their choice or the absence of funding and other related resources to support their placement in inclusive settings as illustrated above. Debates on suitability of special school placements are many and dynamic (Gatheca, 2009; Groce, et al., 2018; Kiarie, 2014; Kochung, 2011 & Mugo, et. al, 2010).

Supporters view these schools as most suitable for YWD with multiple disabilities, who may require modifications which are assumed to be available in such schools due to their small class sizes and the already established structures, teachers and other workforce

\(^4\) These are the rates for 2019
(Kiarie, 2014; Mugo et al., 2010; Gatheca, 2009). Recent findings show that special schools are preferred by some parents, who view them as better placed to provide for the individual needs of their children and concerns for their security (Groce, et al., 2018). Although the government is responsible for these schools, as illustrated later in section 2.4, but for training and remuneration of teachers, most of the other crucial services are often supported by NGOs (Groce, et al., 2018; Smith, Marks, Novelli, Valiente & Scandurra, 2016).

The quality of teaching and learning in these schools has, however, been questioned, with research suggesting negligence attributed to inadequate funding for the same, and to the EARCs which are responsible for placement of students and quality control in these institutions (Elder, et al., 2016; Elder & Folley, 2015; Mugo et. el., 2010). Moreover, as these schools are exclusively boarding in nature, such placement denies YWD their right to live with families (CRPD, 2016). In an environment that advocates inclusivity, as suggested by the various policies shown above, YWD should be supported to learn with their peers within their local areas (Elder et al., 2016). Their continued exclusion from their non-disabled peers and communities propagates the idea of the “other” (Barnes, 2005) which may lead to increased isolation when they re-join their communities and a lack of ‘voice’ to participate in life equally with others.

2.3.3 Higher Education

Higher education in Kenya is mainly offered through public universities established by Acts of Parliament (Commission for Higher Education (CHE), 2012). Recent developments have, however, seen the establishment of private chartered universities in the country necessitated by increased demand for HE, thus transforming the once ‘elite practice’ to a ‘mass system’ (Fuller et al., 2009, p.6). The enrolment bulge has been notable since the onset of FPE in 2003, when numbers in HE rose from 58,637 in 2004/05 to 122,847 in 2008/09 and 276,349 in 2012/13, to approximately 324,560 by 2014 (CHE, 2014; Republic of Kenya, 2014). The increase affirms the important role that is attached to HE both at the individual and country level. At the individual (family) level, HE is a valued economic investment key for avoiding poverty (Odhiambo, 2016). At the state level, not only is it a tool for economic development but also a significant social pillar through which the country hopes to create “a just, cohesive and equitable social development.” (GoK, 2007. p. IV).
Undoubtedly this rapid increase is also characterised by significant challenges in terms of quality of education and inequalities in access (Odhiambo, 2016; Oketch, 2019). Of interest to this study is the high access inequity arising from factors other than academic ability which leave out YWD. As mentioned earlier, access to HE is highly depended on merit - the minimum score in the standardised KCSE is a C+. Applicants must also meet specific degree programme subject cluster points. Admission is done centrally by the Kenya Universities and Colleges Central Placement Service (KUCCPS), which decides the cut-off each year depending on overall performance in the country (KUCCPS, online).

Whilst merit is crucial for ensuring quality, it is also observable that the characteristics of the same (merit) hinges on access to quality secondary education which, as observed above, historically eludes YWD (Elder & Foley, 2015; Mugo et al., 2010). That YWD are disproportionately underrepresented in HE is evident. With the systematic patterns of social and educational exclusion that hinder their access to basic inclusive education, HE becomes almost unattainable (Kochung, 2011). For the few YWD who make the entry, either through merit or affirmative action, prejudice, discrimination and denial of rights remain a barrier to participation (Opini, 2012). The limited available studies in this area show that many universities are not prepared for YWD, thus in practice limiting their placement options to a few universities (Kamundia, 2016). Significant cases of YWD being informally dissuaded from participating in courses of their choice have also been reported (Kamundia, 2016; Opini, 2012). Funding for YWD is also limited, even though the government offers loans to all students admitted through KUCCPS, this mainly covers tuition fees, leaving very little for personal upkeep (Kochung, 2011; Opini, 2012). Consequently, even though affirmative action has allowed them access, many YWD continue to miss out completely or study with numerous difficulties that limit their learning and participation in other areas of life (Kamundia, 2016; Kochung, 2011; Opini, 2012). Personal communication with some YWD show that many frequently call off their studies and/ or end up taking a long time to graduate. The above reasons may explain why government records on YWD in HE are scarce and, where available, inconsistent (Mugo et al., 2010). Unsurprisingly, as illustrated earlier in chapter 1, the experiences of YWD in HE are the least researched in Kenya. Groce (2016) decries this as a lost opportunity and calls for research to focus on this area.
2.4 NGOs and their role in education for YWD

The place of NGOs in Kenya’s education system has been widely documented (see, MoEST/VSO, 2016; Groce, et al., 2018; Ingstad & Grut, 2007; Smith, et al., 2016 & Njihia, 2018). As mentioned in section 2.2, the involvement of NGOs in the education of children and YWD dates back to the colonial period when church-based organisations were involved in setting up special schools in various parts of the country. Their role in education continues to increase since the inception of FPE which, as discussed earlier, came with a myriad of challenges which the government could not address adequately on its own.

A collaborative survey between the Ministry of Education and the NGO Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO), on special needs education in the country shows that support from NGOs contributes significantly to children and YWD’s access and participation in education in the country (MoEST/VSO, 2016). The most common support given involves payment of fees, feeding programmes and provision of assistive devices; many of these organisations have recently incorporated research in their operations, which is helping inform practice (MoEST/VSO, 2016). Research from some of the NGOs suggest that their findings have led to some policy changes in some county governments (see, Groce et al., 2018; LCD, 2017).

Groce et al. (2018) observe that, to a large extent, most inclusive education programmes targeting children and YWD are supported by NGOs. Nonetheless, these scholars caution that this often makes the government complacent and not take responsibility; left unaddressed, this will perpetuate divisions and insufficient budgeting for these youth (Groce et al., 2018). Others view the involvement of NGOs as both a “blessing and a curse” (Ingstad & Grut, 2007 p. 53). As a blessing, NGOs provide vital educational support to a significant number of children and YWD who need it but cannot afford it. Yet, such continued support is also seen as a curse in the event it is withdrawn, leaving the beneficiaries stranded and often regressing in terms of any gains made earlier (Ingstad & Grut, 2007).

Further, since these organisations are not spread across the country, only YWD who are within their areas of geographical focus benefit. Moreover, while support with fees and assistive devices is important, it creates a form of dependency and risks of new forms of power imbalances such as those associated with the charity and medical models of
disability (Oliver, 1990). There is therefore need that such help be directed to empowering families and local communities to facilitate their ability to take on these responsibilities.

2.5 ICTs in Kenyan education

Because of the challenges highlighted above, the Kenyan government continues to explore various ways to enhance and increase educational opportunities for marginalised groups in the country, including the use of ICT and internet services (Kamau, 2014). The national policy key to the emergence of ICTs in education in Kenya was put in place in 2006 (Republic of Kenya, 2006). Through the policy, the government seeks to “facilitate sustained economic growth and poverty reduction, promote social justice and equity, mainstream gender in national development; empower the youth and disadvantaged groups, stimulate investment and innovation in ICT, and achieve universal access to ICT” (Republic of Kenya, 2006, p. 2).

It is noticeable that there is no specific mention of PWD in the policy. Whilst it can be assumed that they are represented in the ‘disadvantaged groups’, such omission raises concerns about the place of YWD in this key area, bearing in mind the potential of ICTs and other digital technologies for their participation in education and training (for example; Ellis & Kent, 2011; Lewthwaite, 2011; Seale et al., 2008; 2010). In education, the policy aims to encourage “the use of ICT in schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutions in the country so as to improve the quality of teaching and learning” (Republic of Kenya, 2006, p.10). Following this, the government mandated the Kenya Institute of Curriculum Development (KICD) to integrate ICTs and internet services into education.

However, the uptake of these technologies in Kenyan schools has been slow and scattered due to what analysts view as a lack of political goodwill (e.g. Kamau, 2014; Zelenzy-Greene, 2017). Whilst some of the required infrastructure (e.g. secured computer labs, electricity, computer hardware and internet connections) has been installed, this is limited to a few schools mainly in urban areas (Kamau, 2014). Between 2016 and 2017, the government had also started to introduce laptops in schools, but this was discontinued immediately after the presidential elections in 2017. Critics observe that the project was ill conceived and poorly implemented at the expense of basic requirements such as desks (Igunza, 2016; Nyamori, 2016). The choice of computers to actualise the use of ICTS in education has also been questioned given the widespread uptake of mobile phones in the country particularly amongst the youth (CAK, 2017; Zelenzy-Greene, 2017) even in

2.5.1 Youth and ICTs/digital technologies in Kenya

According to a survey by CAK (2017), the increased usage of ICTS in the country is mainly associated with the youth, particularly those aged between 18 to 30 years. The survey shows a high presence of these youth in social media platforms especially Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp and blogs. This is largely associated with an increase in, and availability of, internet enabled mobile phones whose prices are said to be highly subsidized by various phone companies currently operating in the country. The survey showed that 88 percent of these youth were mainly on Facebook, which is said to have a flow of between 4.3 - 5.1 million users monthly in the country (Juma, 2017).

Whilst the highlighted statistics are important, they offer little insight about the contextual inequalities associated with youths’ access and usage of these media in different parts of the country. This is not uncommon internationally (e.g. Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). The few empirical studies available on youths’ use of social media show that despite the increased uptake, the digital divide between rural and urban context is very noticeable especially because of the high cost of internet connection and poor connectivity in rural areas (e.g. UNICEF, 2013). This divide is also conspicuous between youth from poorly resourced households and those from households with higher income (Jantii, 2015; UNICEF, 2013; Wyche, Forte & Schoenebeck, 2013 a & b). Another divide that is evident and which this study hopes to contribute to is the absence of YWD voice in these studies. Although research on the experiences of social media by youth in Kenya is relatively new, the missing voice of YWD raises concerns and illustrates the way their issues are often neglected even in areas that may have potential to benefit them such as the new media.

Research in the Global North suggests that these media have high potential of altering hierarchies, changing social divisions, creating possibilities and opportunities (Beer & Burrow, 2007; Van Dijck, 2013). In particular, social media has been said to enhance the participation of YWD in HE in these contexts (Lewthwaite, 2011). Like their non-disabled peers, YWD are attracted to these media, which are said to be key in enhancing connectivity, learning and communication as ways of gaining life chances (Christiansen, Utas, and Vigh, 2006). Exploring YWD experiences on social media in Kenya is therefore
crucial as it might provide insights on how to expand their access and participation in HE where they are significantly underrepresented as shown here.

### 2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered the Kenyan education system and the situation of YWD. I have demonstrated that the possibilities for YWD are currently highly limited mainly because of the normative way in which curriculum provision is structured, availed and assessed. Whilst it is notable that there is commitment towards the inclusion of YWD as evidenced in the various policies and legislations that have been put in place over the years, this has only improved their access in primary education. YWD continue being left behind with only a few making the transition to secondary education, which is a crucial foundation for HE. YWD cannot benefit from the many inclusion policies if they are not present in schools. There is therefore need to rethink inclusion practices in the system to ensure that all learners are availed of opportunities to learn. Otherwise, as highlighted in the general statements of UN CRPD (2016), “placing students with disabilities within mainstream classes without accompanying structural changes to, for example, organization, curriculum and teaching and learning strategies, does not constitute inclusion” (General comment no.4 (2016). p. 3).

Despite its significance in the formation of fundamentals skills, attitudes and opportunities necessary for survival in adulthood, HE is still elusive for many YWD. Through affirmative action as contained in the Constitution and the Education Act of 2012, a few YWD are slowly gaining admission into HE despite the numerous barriers that continue limiting their potential to participate as full members. There is therefore need to document personal experiences of these youth and the various aspects of their lives such as their lived experiences of social media use. As mentioned here, activity on social media amongst youth is highly prevalent in Kenya and might broaden YWD possibilities and awareness of how to move towards their goals in HE and, in turn, improve their life chances in adulthood.

In exploring their social media experiences, this study responds to the various calls on research into the lives of YWD in HE in Kenya (for example; Groce, 2016; Kett, 2012; Mugo et al. 2010). The study proposes to explore these experiences from the standpoint of what individual YWD value about social media within the context of HE. To do so, a robust framework that moves the focus from collective ‘rights’ to what individuals value is
suggested, hence the capability approach as introduced in chapter one and elaborated further in chapter four. In shifting attention from rights to what individuals value, this study does not in any way discount the importance of rights in supporting inclusion of YWD in HE. However, it argues that being in HE is not only about rights; it also involves what YWD value at a personal level thus the need to focus on these. In the next chapter I present the literature review.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

3.1 Introduction

In this chapter I consider literature relevant to the study of the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in HE in Kenya. Because lived experiences, social media, YWD and HE in Kenya embrace a wide range of knowledge, for the purpose of the literature review, it is necessary to make the scope clear. First, I provide a general overview of the conceptions of the internet and social media, showing how it has become a regular part of young people’s lives globally. Second, in order to position the social media usage of YWD - the group selected for this study - it is necessary to have a broad understanding of the literature related to social media use by this age-group in HE more generally, regardless of disability or locus. Following this, I key in on the specific situation of Kenya where this study took place as it is critical to understand the nature of the context in which social media is being deployed. Finally, I conclude the review and address the research questions which I present at the end of the chapter.

This review is selective and focuses on the key ideas from the literature that are relevant to youth within HE context. Studies reviewed in this chapter are mainly drawn from the Global North because this is where significant empirical studies on various aspects of access to and use of social media by students in HE, some of which include YWD, have been undertaken. Whilst the policies, conditions of access and use of social media in these contexts are very different from those in Kenya, the issues raised can help guide this study. As explained in chapter one, the use of ‘youth with disabilities’ in this study denotes undergraduate students with disabilities aged between 18-25 years. The range of disabilities addressed within this chapter is limited to youth with physical and sensory disabilities. As mentioned in chapter 2, currently these are the only groups of YWD provided for in HE in Kenya. Although the studies reviewed here focused on undergraduates within the same age-cohort, these studies do not necessarily use the term ‘youth’ and instead refer to them either as disabled learners or disabled students. To honour the choices made by the authors, these terms will be used interchangeably as they appear in each study. I begin with a brief overview on the conceptions of the internet and social media.
3.2 Conceptions of the internet and social media

There has been an exponential global advancement in internet technologies over the last two decades. The Web has advanced from the old static one-way forms of top-down narrowband network (commonly referred to as Web 1.0) delivering information to passive users for retrieval, to the current dynamic and interactive space (Web 2.0) that involve mass interactions, multiple ways of access, high speed connections and social content (Beer & Burrow, 2007; O’Reilly, 2005). According to Beer & Burrow (2007, p.1), these technologies have high potential for ‘reworking hierarchies, changing social divisions, creating possibilities and opportunities, informing us and reconfiguring our relations with objects, spaces and each other’. This gestures a sense of inclusivity which is crucial for many YWD, who are often excluded in various offline social settings (Oliver & Barnes, 1998). Taken together, these features make the new media significantly different from the old media. These applications include blogs, video-sharing sites, wikis and social media, which are said to be the most popular destination for internet users (Ellis & Kent, 2017; Selwyn, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013).

Social media have now become an essential part of daily life for many people around the world. The advent and growth of these new media applications such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp has brought a substantial shift not only in the way the internet is structured but also in how it is experienced globally (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Common amongst these media is their fluidity with regards to membership, interactivity, content creation and ability to break geographical boundaries, all which enable users to communicate in real time and in a preferred manner (boyd & Ellison, 2007; Selwyn, 2011).

Interaction on social media happens through a profile within a bounded platform (e.g Facebook) where one can identify a list of other users (friends) with whom they share a connection. Such ‘friends’ are not necessarily people that one has close ties with; rather, these are people that one chooses to associate with depending on their age (e.g. youth) or common activities such as a hobby, job or study (boyd, 2007d). Through digital devices, including mobile ones and computers, participating users are able to interact with each other simultaneously to generate, modify and exchange text and visual-audio information via the internet (boyd, 2015; Hargittai, 2007; Selwyn, 2011). This creates a sense of participatory use and collective activity. Thus, as Freidman & Freidman (2013) explain, social media have the unique abilities for communication, collaboration, community,
creativity and convergence. These dynamic attributes of the new media appeal to its users more than the old media - hence its proliferation worldwide, (Selywn, 2011).

The potential offered by social media makes it a significant social context where many people live their daily lives. With the massification of interactions and easy flow of information, social media has made everyone a potential participant in any given public debates and interactions (boyd, 2007d; 2015). These opportunities have traditionally not been available to most people. Even when present in public spaces, some people (e.g. YWD) experience ‘double exclusion’ mostly because of the social stigma associated with disability (Groce & Kett, 2014). For such YWD, social media can be seen as a ‘social lifeline’ (Morrison, 2010). It can break down barriers and enable them to get to know people, express their views and participate in society with others as they wish. In this sense, social media is inherently seen to be able to play an important role in disrupting power structures in public spaces as people now feel more included, having a voice and thus empowered (Ellis & Kent, 2011; Van Dijck, 2013).

Nonetheless, growing evidence shows that social media use is not as equitable and democratic as it is often depicted (Ellis & Kent, 2017; Selwyn, 2011). Access to the internet is not free and many people lack devices to support use; even when these two are available, offline power relations and practices are often replicated online (Ellis & Kent, 2017; Goggin & Ellis, 2015; Livingstone, 2011). Because people connect and collaborate with those who are like them and share their views, the fear of reinforcing beliefs still lurks. Although the platforms allow a user to look around and add in new friends, one can only connect with any such ‘friends’ if they accept one’s invitation. Thus, the new media can be seen more as a double-edged sword that has the potential to empower and at the same time hinder, provide space but also create new barriers and space for discrimination for those who have been traditionally marginalised. Like other technologies, social media is not neutral (Lewthwaite, 2014; Roy & Lewthwaite, 2016).

Social media is also claimed to have democratised the private sphere (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014). Whilst it has made it easier for people to share their experiences with each other globally, the media has also made it difficult to keep private experiences anonymous, due to what commentators refer to as the collapsing of traditional social contexts (see, Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & boyd, 2011). As participants continue to engage with these media, it becomes increasingly hard to demarcate the boundaries between one’s private and public life. The norms, practices and the various identities that an individual takes on
these spheres permeate into the bounds of each other (boyd, 2008). The cues presented through a user’s profile easily points to the identity of the owner. Information on a person’s characteristics (e.g. YWD) can be easily identifiable and thus the possibility of offline stigma being extended online is high. Even with the multiple security and privacy options provided on this media, its shifting nature makes it difficult to keep information online anonymous. Also, the ability of social media to archive content means that replicability is possible (boyd, 2008). Newer social media such as Snapchat is trying to reduce this challenge by offering participation that does not automatically archive data; however, the effectiveness of this is still not clear as analyses are scarce (Josefsson, 2017).

Although beyond the scope of this study, these changes have implications for different users. In the US for example, the recent 2018 Pew report on social media use shows that while Facebook still dominates the landscape, its use amongst young people between the ages of 18 to 24 has dropped significantly, from 71% in 2015 to 51% in 2018. Whilst social media remains a core component of their social lives, this age-group is embracing other platforms and using them regularly5 (Pew, 2018). This age-group includes students pursuing HE – to whom I now turn.

3.3 Students’ use of social media in HE

That social media is now woven into the fabric of student experience is not a new phenomenon bearing in mind that Facebook, which is arguably one of the most popular social media platforms, has its origins in University life (boyd, 2007c; Pew, 2018). Research on students’ social media use and practices in HE has been increasingly examined in the last 12 years. In the Global North, studies suggest that over 95% of undergraduates frequently use various social media (Ferguson, DiaGiacomo, Saliba, Green, Moorly & Wyllie, 2016; Hargittai & Litt, 2011; Mori, 2007). For these ‘digital natives’6 (Prensky, 2001), social media is argued to be not only a powerful communication tool but also a central social space of autonomy in terms of the nature of what they do, where, why, when, how they do it and with whom (Selwyn, 2009; Tapscott, 2009). It provides them with a significant space for constructing their identity and for mediating social relationships away from the prying eyes of adults. Studies show that social media

5 According to the report, currently 94% of these young people use YouTube, 78% use snapchat while 71% are on Instagram and about 45% on Twitter. Facebook continues to be popular across a wide range of demographic groups at around 68%.
6 This term is used to describe young people growing up in the digital age. The term was invented by Prensky (2001), an American writer on education.
has high potential for improving student experience in HE in the Global North (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Selywn & Stirling, 2016). However, this claim remains largely untested in the Global South, particularly in the context of Kenya where potentials and opportunities are different, and even more so with regards to disabled students who are the focus of the current study.

This study takes the approach that despite their heterogeneity, all youth have similar needs and aspirations for connection and networking. Analysis of the literature has identified two broad issues - transition and participation (social & academic) - as important aspects of student usage and experiences of social media in HE. To these has to be added the issue of access specifically for disabled students. I present each of these issues here. To gauge the significance of social media in the lives of both students with and without disabilities, the section begins with an overview of their offline experiences under the stated themes, starting with transition, participation and access respectively.

3.3.1 Social media and student transition into HE

Transition from home into a new (university) environment is not easy for most students. For many, this is the first time they are moving away from home. Debates show that during this stage, these ‘emerging adults’ experience significant changes both emotionally and socially (Wilcox, Winn & Fyvie-Gauld, 2005) and many struggle with the uncertainties of being in a new environment away from their family and close friends (Lowe & Cook, 2003; Thomas, 2002; Yorke & Longden, 2008). Maintaining these connections while at the same time being surrounded by unknown contacts and trying to initiate new intimate bonds is often difficult. This affects their ability to gain meaningful membership of the academic and social world of the university, particularly during the first year (Wilcox et al., 2005; Yorke & Longden, 2008). This can be even harder in the context of Kenya. Unlike England where many students (especially in the North) are increasingly attending their ‘local’ universities (Donnelly & Gamsou, 2018), universities in Kenya are fewer and mainly concentrated in urban areas, hence most students have to travel far away from their homes to access university. Therefore, significance of transition for students is different in both contexts.

While the transition dilemmas are similar for all students, the challenges are often exacerbated for those with disabilities because of the stigma that is associated with their varied conditions (Goode, 2007). Empirical work on the offline experiences of disabled
students reveal that transition into HE is a time of potential vulnerability not only because of the physical and structural barriers in their new educational environments, but more so in terms of development of social networks (Jacklin, Robinson, O’Meara, & Harris, 2007). Studies which emphasise that disability is a social construction show that disabled students are required to actively ‘manage’ their disability (for example, Goode, 2007; Jacklin, et al., 2007; Low, 2009). With regards to identity, transitions into HE can trigger new views on impairment. In social and educational interactions, these students are said to have challenges managing disclosure of disability, either because of the invisibility of their requirements or the extra-visibility of disclosing impairment related needs (Goode, 2007; Low, 2009). This is frequently done on behalf of others as these (disabled) students ‘try to help their non-disabled peers with their discomfort’ (Goode, 2007 p.43). Successful transition into HE therefore becomes extremely problematic as disabled students try to adjust into new physical environments that may not be well suited for them and, at the same time, establish social networks with peers who seem uncomfortable with their presence.

Studies from Australia, the UK and the US, show that social media - mostly Facebook⁷- plays a significant role in helping undergraduates to transition into university life (Lampe, Wohn, Vitak & Walsh, 2011; Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009; Thomas, Briggs, Hart & Kerrigan, 2017). The survey by Madge et al. (2009) found that since social media is already embedded in these incoming students’ social lives, most of them find it useful during this period to find and form networks with their future course mates before they arrive at the University. Through Facebook, for example, they learn about the various activities taking place during the freshers’ week and are able to plan on which ones to attend once they are in campus (Madge et al., 2009).

Importantly, social media provides them space to start building new relationships with fellow students at a ‘safe distance’ (Ferguson, DiaGiacomo, Saliba, Green, Moorly & Wyllie, 2016), while at the same time staying in touch with existing friends and family at home (Yang & Brown, 2013; 2016). In this way, social media is seen to play a ‘double’ role: that is, initiating new online friendships with peers whom they will meet offline in their classes or halls, as well as shifting older offline relationships to online spaces simultaneously. According to Madge et al. (2009), this ‘reiterative use of the virtual and

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⁷ Although the general term ‘social media’ is used, most of the studies reviewed have focused on patterns of Facebook use.
place-based worlds is important in providing a flexible multi-modal approach for young people traversing their new lives and identities as students’ (p.145). Being able to synchronise their online and offline worlds is crucial in affirming their home and student identities.

Although the experiences of disabled students are invisible in the above studies, the notion of social media as a ‘safe space’ (Ferguson et al, 2016) to build relationships before meeting peers offline, is particularly important for this distinct group of students. As has been highlighted earlier in the section, disabled students struggle with disclosure mostly because of the social stigma associated with disability. The ability of social media to enable the ‘creation’ of ‘new identities’ provides disabled students opportunities to start interacting with peers but at the same time decide how much information to share about themselves and how to share such details (Lewthwaite, 2011; Söderström, 2013). Since being friends on Facebook does not automatically translate into ‘real friendship’ in offline space (Madge et al., 2009), disabled students can interact and observe such friends online until such a time they feel ready to disclose (Lewthwaite, 2011).

3.3.2 Participation at the university: Social and academic use

Once at the university, students find social media useful in helping them settle down into social and academic life. As they get used to their new environments and peers, students’ connections with one another become in-depth and more focused (Ellison, Steinfield & Lampe, 2007; Madge, et al., 2009; Thomas et al, 2017). For the majority of students, social media is seen as primarily for socialising; however, a few acknowledge using it informally for academic related work (Ahern, Feller & Nagle, 2016; Ferguson et al., 2016; Madge et al, 2009; Stirling, 2016).

3.3.2.1 Social media and students’ social participation

As highlighted above, social interactions are core to the student experience, particularly in the first year of university life. Although varied, discourses on social participation show that social media (Facebook) has a considerable role in creating and enhancing social interactions amongst students. The survey by Madge et al. (2009) reveals that once at the university Facebook is a crucial ‘social glue’ that enable students settle into university life (p. 141). Participants undertook a range of networked activities including sharing of videos, photos, materials and links with peers. The majority of the participants also used it to find out about or plan social events. The activities were either done individually or in
groups as their new relationships flourished following in-depth offline connections in the university. Their online and offline networks were therefore seen to coexist (Madge et al., 2009).

The survey also noted that participants’ online interactions were not only limited to their new university friendships but also involved chatting with old high school friends. Basically, this entailed sharing about their university experiences. Similar findings have been observed in other studies, which show that, to a large extent, social media is useful in supporting students balance their online and offline identities, it reinforces existing offline relationships and helps them form new ones as they integrate into HE (Ellison et al., 2011; Ferguson et al., 2016; Thomas et al., 2017).

The ability of social media to help students harmonise their online and offline worlds is important. It helps affirm their home and university identities both of which are essential for their emotional well-being, especially during their first year when students may suffer low-self-esteem (Ferguson et al, 2016; Thomas et al, 2017) particularly disabled students (Lewthwaite, 2011). Moreover, the bonds established at this time are essential for their successful participation in offline student life in later years. In this way, Facebook can be best understood as a space for social participation, and an integral element of ‘becoming’ a university student (Prescott, Wilson & Becket, 2013; Stirling, 2016). Notwithstanding, commentators have cautioned against over-privileging Facebook and other social media, noting that it is only one facet of students’ interactions and that face-to-face connections are still vital (e.g. Ellison et al, 2011; Madge et al., 2009).

As shown earlier in this section, most disabled students find it challenging to form social connections outside of their immediate families. They may have strong social connections with their personal assistants, disabled student advisors, or a small group of friends, but ‘they often lack the myriad loose connections which are a vital part of the higher education experience for many students’ (Riddell et al., 2005, p.153). Whilst the advent of social media seemed to gesture a solution for these students, studies reveal complex and varied experiences. In a qualitative study on student experiences of disability and social media in HE in the UK, Lewthwaite (2011) found that for most disabled students, Facebook opened up new possibilities and provided a space for creating non-disabled subjectivities. This gave them opportunities for experiencing new ways of being. Socially, they benefitted by getting access to ‘regular’ student activities and experiences which made it possible for them to socialize in campus and mitigate social impairments. For such students, the ability
to socialise without worrying about their disability is crucial. It gives them a sense of belonging which, as shown above, is essential for their HE student experience. It also gives them power to decide if to disclose their disability. But for some students, particularly those with unseen impairments, the network was difficult and initiated a social experience of disability for the first time (Lewthwaite, 2011). Such an uncontrollable disclosure may affect students’ confidence negatively and in turn, their overall student experience.

Findings from a similar study in Norway showed that apart from their common learning activities, disabled students had minimal offline joint experiences to share with their non-disabled peers (Söderström, 2009). This restricted the possibility of any joint online activities with these peers. Consequently, disabled students spend more time online on Facebook and YouTube, where they easily build networks with strangers. Their interactions were mostly based on common interests such as sharing digital leisure activities. Despite building strong online ties with these strangers, the youth did not disclose their disability. Moreover, the ties remained online with little expectations of extending them offline. Echoing Lewthwaite (2011), the author shows how these students often resisted a ‘disabled’ identity and actively hid their impairments even in interactions with known peers with disabilities.

By refusing to disclose their impairments and continuing to participate in the various recreational activities online, participants accentuate their characteristics as ordinary youths. The implication of this is that these students’ daily lives are lived in a mixed reality (Söderström, 2009; 2013). The observations from these studies resonate with other findings on social media and disability in general which note that, despite the affordances of social media in the social lives of people with disabilities, the norms of everyday offline society are often replicated online (see, Ellis & Kent, 2017; Foley & Ferri, 2012). This is not limited to disability only - commentators observe that this is also common in other studies exploring new media, gender and class (e.g. Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). In this way, social media is seen to reproduce social injustices despite its capacity to break them down as mentioned earlier in the section.

3.3.2.2 Social media for academic participation

The use of social media as a tool for formal learning has been contested. Those who acknowledge its usefulness focus on the possibilities it can offer in terms of collaboration between students and opportunities for informal learning, but not as a formal learning tool
(e.g. Ahern, Feller & Nagle, 2016; Selywn, 2009; Stirling, 2016). As used here, informal learning implies activities such as sharing reading materials. In a study exploring students’ education related use of Facebook, Selwyn (2009) observes that although most students’ activities on Facebook appeared to be academic oriented, basically, it was ‘business as usual’ as students were said to be discussing similar things online as they were face-to-face and ‘presenting themselves as students frequently do’ (p.15). They used it largely for social bonding around learning activities such as sharing of resources and materials, and for mutual support during stressful situations such as the exam period.

Echoing these findings, commentators who have analysed students’ Facebook groups show that Facebook was helpful for informal discussions about work at campus, but most students were opposed to its use for formal learning purposes (Ahern et al, 2016; Prescott, et al, 2013; Stirling, 2016). Because of Facebook’s flexible features, it allowed easy interactions which in turn satisfied significant information sharing and decision-making needs of many of the students (Ahern et al., 2016). Students were reported as using Facebook to talk about work as opposed to doing it. They used it to ask for help when they had missed classes, contact their peers to arrange study group meetings and share links on educational resources. Sharing academic materials on Facebook was said to be easy because ‘participants were there almost every day’ (Stirling, 2016). This was seen to be faster than going through an institutional system to log in and send.

Thus, Facebook can be seen as playing a role in students’ integration into study life. Although it may have the potential for collaborating over knowledge construction and sharing amongst students, this is not necessarily guaranteed. Furthermore, as most of the communication and collaboration was often common amongst peers who were close to each other offline (Madge et al, 2009; Selywn, 2009), the likelihood of the new media being used to exclude those who seem not to ‘belong’ to such groups (e.g. disabled students) is high. In this sense, the media may be seen to propagate exclusion within HE.

It is not possible to ascertain the views of disabled students in all the above studies. Nonetheless, the few studies that have focused on disabled students’ social media use show similar results. Like their non-disabled peers, only a few disabled students view social media as fit for formal study. For many, the new media is said to be too distracting and time consuming for use as a learning tool (Lewthwaite, 2011; Seale, et al, 2010). Findings from the two studies suggest that many disabled students frequently found it difficult to demarcate boundaries between academic and social use of social media. It is, however,
important to note that in both studies, most of the participants had identified as having learning disabilities (mostly dyslexia and communication difficulties). Therefore, the nature of their individual differences might contribute to the above observations.

3.3.3 Access to social media by disabled students in HE

Disabled students’ social media access is often analysed in relation to their disabilities; thus, the stress is more on the media’s accessibility or if students have the right assistive technologies to assess the media. These deficit approaches tend to look at these students as being the problem and thus only result to partial descriptions of the static features of the ‘digital divide’ that is perceived to hinder their access to social media (Roy & Lewthwaite, 2016). Disabled students’ access needs are both disability and non-disability related. Like their non-disabled peers, disabled students are also part of the ‘Net Generation’ and have the same needs and desires to participate, collaborate and connect online using social media (Tapscott, 2009). However, for disabled students the value attached to social media is different because of their impairments and the associated barriers. The more visible they are online, the higher their chances of being visible offline (Ellis & Kent, 2017).

For many disabled students, access to social media is fraught with challenges. Their needs continue to be overlooked on these media despite its potential ability to aid their participation in HE (Lewthwaite, 2011). The few reviews in this area show that despite having knowledge and access to computers and the internet, many disabled students were considered as ‘have-nots’ and often described as experiencing ‘second digital divide’ due to the inaccessibility of the new media (e.g. Ascuncion et al., 2012; Lewthwaite, 2011; Seale et al., 2008, 2010).

Whilst the barriers were not common to all, popular sites with students such as Facebook and YouTube excluded screen-reader users and the audio equivalent was unusable and had structural failings within them which made them difficult to use. Research shows that students with unseen impairments (e.g. dyslexia) felt that ‘a lot of skill’ and ‘patience’ was required as use was ‘frustrating’ (Lewthwaite, 2011). These students felt restricted because these media platforms were popular among their peers yet inaccessible to them - they were ‘left out’. For such students, social media was viewed as punitive and disabling and it ascribed a deficit identity to them (Lewthwaite, 2011; Söderström, 2013). The inability to factor in the needs of all people in these media from conception is frequently based on the medical model of disability (Oliver, 1990) which views PWD in general only in terms of
their impairments. This perpetuates normative attitudes towards disability. In so doing, disabled students are thus seen as the ‘other’ whose needs are ‘special’, hence the need for additional (assistive) technologies to ‘help them’ access these media. This only serves to exacerbate the inequalities of disabled students in HE. Although barriers still remain, debates in this area show that overall, social media and other ICTs are increasingly being responsive to accessibility needs of PWD in general (Roy & Lewthwaite, 2016).

Beyond the focus on assistive technologies and accessibility of various social media, analyses have now expanded to cover the context within which accessibility for disabled students is now understood. As shown earlier in the section, there is a limited body of work that has explored, among other issues, cost of access to social media, availability/institutional factors of use, educational issues of access and the type of social media that these students frequent (e.g. Ascuncion, et.al, 2012; Lewthwaite, 2011; Söderström, 2009, 2013). The analyses by Lewthwaite (2011) & Söderström, (2009) which have been illustrated earlier in the section have focused on social and interpersonal elements of access, showing among other things the possibilities availed through social media to either diminish or enhance disability. These studies, however, appear to be more concerned about how disability/ability is constructed and mediated by social media. This approach does not provide a holistic evaluation of why disabled students go online and therefore makes it hard to assess the motivation for their being online and the value of these media in their lives. This is what I am interested in because it aligns to the CA which is interested in value for the individual and individual choice and agency.

Taken together, analyses from the three themes discussed in this section offer useful insights into the use and experiences of social media by students in HE in the Global North, showing both the opportunities available for participation and the risks involved as well as the diversities of these experiences. The audits highlight high potential particularly in social media’s ability to enhance students’ transition experiences into HE and, thereafter, their participation and inclusion in social life in HE. But for the few analyses shown, the experiences of disabled students on these media remain generally invisible in most studies, including large scale surveys (e.g. Ferguson, et al, 2016; Madge, et al, 2009). It is still not clear if they were represented within the samples. Implicitly, this shows how in most cases, issues of disabled students are often treated as separate and requiring ‘specialist’ attention (Roy & Lewthwaite, 2016; Lewthwaite, 2011). This suggests that their student experiences continue to be problematic and may lead to further inequalities
despite the potentials that are possible within social media spaces as has been highlighted. Overall, whilst the studies in this section have provided useful themes which can guide the direction of the current thesis, there are varied contextual differences between the Global North and the context of Kenya where the current study is based, and which I now address in the next section.

3.4 Students’ use of social media in HE in Kenya

As evidenced in the preceding section, analyses of HE students’ social media use and experiences in the Global North reveal that, but for access issues related to disability, the need for connectivity, networking and participation is similar for both disabled students and their non-disabled peers. The small but growing research on disabled students’ experiences of social media has concentrated on disability related needs, while the non-disability issues of access remain largely unattended. Accordingly, in this section I will analyse the use of social media within the Kenyan context. As Sen observes, a person’s agency, and the choices s/he makes can only be understood in relation to the substantive freedoms - practical opportunities available in her/his context (Sen, 1999). Hence, we need to know the Kenyan situation to recognise the assumptions and the particularities. I will start by showing the existing work in this area with regards to youth in general followed by literature within the context of HE. I will unpack the contextual differences that are present, showing how these influence the participation of youth on social media and the implications on their offline lives. The situation of YWD will be expounded within each section. I conclude the chapter by showing how this study intends to further the discussion on YWD experiences and use of social media.

There is a limited but growing research on youths’ social media use in Kenya. This work has largely concentrated on contextual issues of access thus looking at the differences in access between rural and urban youth and the patterns of use between urban youth from different socio-economic backgrounds. Within these reviews, the experiences of YWD are rare. Findings from a large-scale survey by UNICEF (2013) showed that although the youth were well informed about social media and that use of the same was high compared to other countries that had been surveyed, there were marked inequalities with regards to access by youth in different parts of the country. This is not uncommon internationally (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). The digital divide was said to be noticeable between rural and urban contexts because of the high cost of internet connection and poor connectivity in rural areas where the youth were generally seen as ‘left out’ of these media. This divide
was also evident between youth from poorly resourced households and their counterparts from higher income areas. (Jantti, 2015; UNICEF, 2013; Wyche, Forte & Schoenebeck, 2013 a & b).

Echoing the UNICEF study, the findings of Wyche et al. (2013a & b) highlight further contextual related issues which influence the participation of youth on social media (Facebook). Through observations and individual interviews in cyber cafés in rural parts of the country and an informal settlement in Nairobi, the two studies show that amongst the rural youth, the main activities involved sharing photos with family and friends living in urban areas - this was seen as an additional way to sustain these relationships. Because of the high fee required to access social media, usage was infrequent as it was seen as a luxury activity which was not easy to sustain (Wyche et al., 2013 a). Their urban counterparts were, however, regularly on Facebook, mainly to seek for employment opportunities and monetary support from family or friends abroad (Wyche et al., 2013b). These youth often “have to make hard decisions about what they can afford spending their little money on.” (p.3). Since the two studies were undertaken in cyber cafés, it is not possible to tell the views of youth who go online using personal mobile phones whose use has now become widespread in the country (CAK, 2016; 2017). However, an understanding of these findings is important as it relates to the prior histories of my study participants’ engagement with digital technologies. I return to this in chapter 6.

Marked social class inequalities with regards to ‘device divide’ (Selywn, 2015), social networks, digital literacy skills and knowledge of the possibilities availed by social media have also been observed (Jäntti, 2015; Kibere, 2016). In her comparative study of urban youth from middle-class families and those living in informal settlements, Jäntti (2015), shows that significant number of middle-class youth owned iPhones, iPads, and could afford faster internet. These youth used a variety of platforms (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube and blogs), were more informed and confident in their use and had specific purposes of going online such as sharing links on job opportunities, news updates and entertainment. On the other hand, youth from the informal settlements often used Facebook and WhatsApp, mostly for entertainment and civic participation, which was perceived to contribute to tangible changes with regards to service provision in their communities. A few of these youth owned cheap android phones while most of them used cybercafé services to go online. Similar to the observations by UNICEF (2013) and Wyche
et al. (2013a &b), cost of access was said to be a big hindrance to these youths’ ability to go online (Jäntti, 2015).

The observations about socio-economic differences of access to social media have been supported by the ethnographic work by Kibere (2016) which show that while social media creates ‘new’ digital spaces for youth within informal settlements, these spaces are restricted and rarely extend to social ties beyond their offline social class networks. Despite the youths’ efforts to engage online with peers outside their offline social networks, their social environment was a hindrance. She refers to this as the ‘paradox of mobility’ (p. 59) and concludes that ‘social class and place of residence are distinctive markers in the process of social networking’ (p.47).

Within the HE context, the few studies available show that the trend of analyses is not very different from the above. The reviews have mainly concentrated on the institutional issues of access, thus looking at different universities in relation to provision of internet and other ICT services (e.g. Njoroge, 2013; Waithaka, 2013) and patterns of social media use by youth in various universities (e.g. Foley & Masingila, 2015; Koross & Kosgei, 2016; Ndlela & Mulwo, 2017; Ogaji, Okoyeukwu, Wanjiku, Osiro & Ogutu, 2017). Most of these later studies seem to analyse the use and experiences of youth in social media in a binary format: useful or wasteful use. On one hand, social media platforms are viewed as ‘liberating’ and ‘empowering’ youth because they enable them to discuss topics such as relationships, family planning, and contraceptives with people viewed as authority figures (e.g. lecturers and parents) (Ndlela & Mulwo, 2017). This is viewed as a ‘useful’ use of social media. The study notes that the physical distance created by social media is crucial in facilitating these conversations. Ordinarily, this is not common in offline spaces.

On the other hand, students are perceived to ‘waste’ their “new found freedoms” on social media by organising strikes against university administrations (Koross & Kosgei, 2016). This qualitative study sought to understand the role of social media (Facebook & WhatsApp) on students’ unrest in various public universities. Among other things, the study observes that these teenage students have “very little knowledge on how to manage freedom and interaction on social media” (p.165). As used in the study, the term ‘freedom’ signifies being away from or undertaking activities without being supervised by authority figures (mostly parents) and hence the authors’ call on university lecturers and administrators to join students’ social media platforms either as monitors or moderators (Koross & Kosgei, 2016). There is a lack of clarity on how these authors gained access to
students’ social media platforms and neither is it clear how their proposal for lecturers to join these platforms is to be undertaken; this raises ethical concerns. Although violence is not condoned, students’ use of social media spaces to channel their grievances should not be necessarily seen as a waste of time or abuse of freedom but rather as them being agentic in seeking for solutions especially in contexts such as these where they “felt restricted” with limited options to channel their grievances (p.165).

Other ways in which students are seen to ‘waste’ a lot of time is when they chat with friends on Facebook or WhatsApp instead of using their time on these media to improve their academic study (Ogaji et al, 2017). Interestingly, the study notes that most of these youth (pharmacy students) were normally occupied in the day and mostly went on social media after classes and during the weekends. It is not uncommon for students to use social media for social activities with their friends; studies in the Global North have shown that students value the social benefits of using social media (e.g. Madge et al., 2009; Selwyn, 2009). Chatting with friends as seen here should not be viewed as ‘wasting time’. Besides the social benefits that have been associated with such networking activities in HE (e.g. Ferguson et al, 2016; Madge et al, 2009), from a CA which I am using in the current study, chatting (wasting time) could still be a part of a life that a student values, and even useful if it helps them engage in other activities which make them happy.

In my search so far, only one article (Foley & Masingila, 2015) was close to my proposed study on the use of social media by YWD in HE. It was not specifically focused on social media but explored the use of mobile devices as assistive technologies for students with visual impairments in what the authors describe as “resource-limited environments”. It draws on practices of Universal Design for Learning, a teaching approach which is argued to aim at meeting the needs of every student in a classroom (CAST, 2011). Their findings show that generally, mobile devices (iPad minis and keyboards) provided the participants with i) access to education, ii) the means to participate in everyday life using social media - as used here, participation refers to students’ social activities on social media, and iii) opportunity to create “a community of practice”- which is described as YWD using their digital literacy skills to support each other. Of importance to my study is their findings on the use of social media (mainly Facebook, Google+ and FaceTime) which participants acknowledged as ‘freedom’ (p. 336) as it enabled them make their contribution on various issues and read other people’s contributions, just like their non-disabled peers in campus.
Whilst the study uses the term ‘freedom’, which the current study emphasises, their definition is narrow as it only refers to the ability to undertake these cited activities.

In summary, the audits in this section highlight the diverse ways that youth in Kenya use and experience social media both within and outside of HE. The studies suggest that the youths’ experiences of social media are not uniform but nuanced and often responsive to their specific contexts both economically and geographically, thus confirming earlier observations by commentators in the area of social media use and youth (e.g. boyd, 2007d; Livingstone, 2011). The experiences of YWD remain unclear as they have not been explicitly mentioned in any of the earlier studies in this section. Their invisibility is, however, not surprising bearing in mind that most of the studies discussed earlier in the section took place in cyber cafés whose services, as shown, were said to be unaffordable for most of the youth (Jäntti, 2015; UNICEF, 2013; Wyche et al., 2013b). The likelihood of finding YWD in such cyber cafés is therefore low not only because of cost issues but also because of the widespread social and environmental challenges associated with disability as has been illustrated in chapter 2. A more purposeful and participatory approach that acknowledges these diversities is ideal for capturing the voices of YWD.

The research by Foley & Masingila (2015) raises a few concerns. First, its approach is still very much tied to both the charity and the medical model of disability which looks at YWD as those in need of help by ‘superior’ agencies. Its approach is largely based on impairment needs assessed by ‘experts’ and involving “specialist services that are often severely limited in geographical, age, and impairment reach, as well as generally being expensive to run” (Coe, 2012, p. 402). In the study, participants were provided with free iPads and keyboards which the authors note “are still very expensive for the average Kenyan” (p.335), while spare parts and servicing was done in the US where the researchers come from. Little is shown about why commonly available smartphone devices and screen-readers which run on Windows, would not be used. In such ‘resource limited environment’, the use of inordinately priced Apple products, which the authors acknowledge were out of reach for these participants, is unethical. Related to the above is the issue of sustainability of both the devices and freedoms gained by participants after the research process. The writers are not explicit on how participants will continue enjoying the ‘free’ repair services for continual use of devices and retention of capabilities gained so far. This raises another ethical concern with regards to whose interest the study served. By not using the locally available resources, the study fails to foreground the deeper nuances
of the lived experiences of YWD in Kenya and thus makes it hard for the reader to understand whether social media brings about real benefits or further disability.

Disability researchers working within the Global South have critiqued these approaches where ‘expert’ disability researchers from the Global North export their systems, technologies and methodologies to countries in the Global South with little or no considerations at all of their differing economic and social-cultural contexts and, in turn, how these diversities affect YWD (for example, Grech, 2009; Singal, 2010). Despite these limitations, the study offers a significant foundation for exploring the experiences of YWD and the new media in HE in Kenya, an area which is still highly under-researched.

Therefore, through an in-depth study with a small number of these youth, I aim to address this gap in the literature by exploring how social media might disrupt inequalities in functioning achievements of YWD (Sen, 2009) in HE within the nuanced context of Kenya. The findings of this research will provide greater insights to HE providers, curriculum designers and campaigners to support informed planning and provision for YWD, as there is currently little analysis in this area in Kenya (Groce, 2016; Folley & Masingila, 2015; Opini, 2012).

3.5 Conclusion and research questions

In this chapter, I have shown the development and significance of social media particularly for youth in HE both in the Global North and South (Kenya). Through the three key themes identified - ‘access’, participation and transition - I have highlighted what social media can offer in terms of inclusion, and equality of youth. I have also shown that YWD are under-represented in research on social media in both the Global North and in Kenya. But for the few notable exceptions, much of the available research which does include YWD has mainly emphasised accessibility issues related to barrier-removal. Although this review does not underestimate the need for assistive technologies for these youth in any way, such simplistic representations of YWD use and experiences of social media is problematic.

This study intends to extend the debate by building a holistic understanding of the broader issues that can influence how YWD experience social media. By using the CA, which foregrounds the freedoms that people have to pursue and achieve valued ends, the study will explore if and how activity on social media supports YWD to be agentive and to
choose particular functionings and then to develop these valued functionings. As much as possible, these youths’ perspectives and agency online will be foregrounded so as to understand what freedoms (if any) are increased or hindered and, in turn, how these freedoms relate to their offline lives so as to contribute to this largely underexplored facet of YWD experiences of social media use in HE in Kenya and, by extension, in Sub-Saharan Africa. In this way, I aim to expand the ongoing studies on YWD and social media, particularly how activity on social media might support their transition, access and participation in HE. This may be useful in supporting their inclusion and equity within education as emphasised within the CA. I seek to answer two research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in HE in Kenya?

2. How does activity on social media influence YWD awareness of present and future possibilities of ways of being in the world?

The conceptual framing that follows in the next chapter highlights the main features of the CA relevant to this study while the discussions in chapter 7 and 8 elaborates it further in relation to participants’ data.
Chapter 4: Conceptual Framework

4.1 Introduction

This section builds on the discussion of the capability approach as introduced in chapter one. To illustrate the usefulness of the CA in this study, I will explore the links between the CA, disability, education and social media. I start by outlining the broad guiding ideas and then show how these have been developed within the disability, education and social media discourse. I will then move on to the key constructs of the CA that guided this study and thereafter provide the conclusion.

4.2 The Capability approach

As introduced in chapter one, the CA is broadly understood as a normative framework that can be used to evaluate and assess a wide range of things - for example, individual well-being, social arrangements and design of policies (Robeyns, 2005). In all these normative exercises, the core priority of the CA is its focus on people and the substantive freedoms (capabilities) they have to pursue and achieve what they value. A person’s capability is:

> The various combinations of functionings that a person can achieve. Capability is thus a set of vectors of functionings, reflecting the person’s freedom to lead one type of life or another (Sen, 1992, p. 40).

Examples of capabilities include the ability to move around freely or genuine opportunities to use social media or to be educated (Sen, 2009). These features of the CA appeal to this study which aims to provide a platform for YWD voice with regards to their experiences of social media use and participation in HE, hence the use of the CA in this study.

Sen developed the CA due to his dissatisfaction with the ‘basic needs’ approach to people’s welfare in human development, arguing that life encompasses more than these aspects (Sen, 1992; 2009). He opposes the idea of measuring an individual’s standard of living in terms of his/her ability (e.g. material/financial resources) to buy certain commodities because the availability of such material resources does not necessarily equate to an adequate measure of the individual’s well-being (1992). Instead, Sen proposes that equality in social justice and human development should be conceptualized in relation to the real opportunities (capabilities) available to a person to pursue the type of life he/she values (functionings) (Sen, 2009).
The CA allows us to see the difference between means and ends as well as the processes that convert means into ends (Sen, 2009). Sen illustrates this by reference to two people, one who uses a wheelchair and the other who does not. While both of them might have equal income and material resources, the former might be much less well-off in terms of their ability to move around if there are no clear paths to enable the wheelchair to move freely (Sen, 2009). For this reason, the powerful rhetoric of the “equality of man” tends to “deflect attention from these differences” (Sen, 1992, p.1). Sen maintains that in our understanding of equality in debates about human development, “human diversity is no secondary complication (to be ignored, or to be introduced, “later on”); it is a fundamental aspect of our interest in equality” (Sen, 1992, p. xi). That is, social justice depends on recognition of (relevant) differences. I discuss the issue of human diversity further in section 4.4.2.

This is significant in this study on YWD; it allows for an understanding of disability embedded within a multitude of factors such as impairment, youth, education, poverty, social media, development and wellbeing (Sen, 1999; Terzi, 2010). We can only understand what social media enables these youth to be and become based on their context, their hopes and fears and the individual life within this context. This moves the discussion beyond the narrow focus of ‘do the YWD have access to social media?’, which only captures what is ‘visible and outward’ and material. Though this is an important point, it tells us very little about the way in which it (social media) affects the lives of these particular youth within the HE context at this particular time in Kenya.

Although Sen and other advocates of the CA are not opposed to the instrumental role of income in securing individual well-being and freedom, it is argued to be insufficient in itself to procure all that fundamentally matters to people (Alkire & Foster, 2011; Drèze & Sen, 2002). In a world rampant with social injustices brought about by the effects of disability, poverty, and marginalisation, a focus on the freedoms that people have is crucial in countering these challenges, so that people have more freedom to live the kind of life they have reason to value (Sen, 1992; 1999). For example, in reducing disability as shown in the earlier illustration, giving extra income would not be enough to solve the challenges experienced by the person on a wheelchair; instead, efforts should be on enhancing other related capabilities such as adequate access to public space and inclusive policies (Burchardt, 2004; Mitra, 2006; Terzi, 2010). This broadening of capabilities has essential value for individual well-being but is also fraught with challenges, especially with regards
to identifying which capabilities are basic, how they will be determined and by whom (Robeyns, 2005a). This is mainly because, under different circumstances, people value different things at different times (Robeyns, 2005a).

**The list debate**

Whilst Sen is credited for pioneering the CA, other scholars have developed it further over the years, including philosopher Martha Nussbaum, whose large contribution to the approach cannot be underestimated. Among other things, Nussbaum proposes an explicit list of ‘central human capabilities’ which, in her view, should be the goal of all public policy (Nussbaum, 2000). She claims that the list is universal and therefore should be endorsed by all governments. She also argues that her list is a ‘partial’ theory of justice which should provide a threshold regarding what is a dignified life central to human development (Nussbaum, 2011). Critics, however, question the legitimacy of her list which is seen as “not just paternalistic but even rather colonial for an American Philosopher to determine the central capabilities for other societies” (Stewart, 2001, p.1192). Moreover, her basic capabilities are more like an entitlement than something valued and actively chosen by individuals (Robeyns, 2005) and raises the question of whether rationality can be universally agreed.

This reluctance to impose a particular view of flourishing in the world is one of the main reasons why Sen has refused to endorse a pre-defined list of capabilities. Instead, he maintains that the choice and weighting of capabilities depend on individual value judgements (Sen, 2004b). Besides, developing such a list would be fraught with difficulties with regards to reaching reasoned agreement on ‘that ideal state’ (Sen, 2009, p.10-12). This is crucial as we consider the wide-ranging cultural, social and geographical differences between people and countries. Sen envisions that through a democratic process of public debates and reasoning, those at the centre of the evaluations can select capabilities to be used for specific purposes and that each purpose might need its own list (2004b). This has been the basis for the work done by some scholars working with youth within the context of education in Sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Mutanga & Walker, 2015; Walker, 2006, 2007) and justifies my approach in this study.

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8 Life; bodily health; bodily integrity; sense; imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one’s environment.
While Sen is keen to identify issues of injustice, his conception of the approach is not in any way intended to be a theory of justice (Sen, 2004; 2009). By leaving the approach open, Sen encourages it to develop and allows everyone - researchers and research participants – “to perceive a space for themselves” in a project (Gasper, 2007, p.336). Furthermore, by providing people with opportunities and space to express their opinions and make them count, we are expanding their “capability of voice” (Powell & McGrath, 2014, p 11). This is particularly important in this study that is focused on listening to the voice of YWD with regards to their experiences of social media use; it enables them to have a say in deciding what counts as valuable capabilities.

In this study, I am not setting out a list of positive factors which social media offers YWD in Kenya; rather, I am interested in the voice of individual YWD and their use of social media and why they value it. Subscribing to Nussbaum’s approach would miss out on the nuances that are associated with the heterogeneities of these youth and their particular HE environments in Kenya and how these diversities affect their lived experiences. The study used participatory approaches (see chapter 5) and the findings and the discussions that are presented here follow on the data collected from individual YWD regarding their experiences of social media use in HE. As will be evident in the findings and analysis chapters, I have presented data from all the seven participants both individually and collectively.

4.3 Capability approach and disability

Sen has not written on disability exclusively; however, his concern for PWD and their well-being is noticeable in the clear examples that he gives throughout his work (see, 1985, p. 5; 1992, p 74; 2002, p.663 & 2009, p.258). For example, he emphasizes the importance of disability “for the understanding of deprivation in the world” and as “one of the most important arguments for paying attention to the capability perspective” (Sen, 2009, p. 258). In this regard, he highlights the impact of personal characteristics such as impairment, which he refers to as disability, on an individual’s capability set (Mitra, 2006). Sen maintains that PWD might suffer two types of material disadvantages namely: earning handicap and conversion handicap (Sen, 2009, p.258). PWD might suffer an earning handicap as they might find it hard to find a job or retain it despite their qualifications and even when they find one, they may receive a lower wage compared to their non-disabled peers. Similarly, conversion handicap makes it difficult for some PWD to convert their resources or income into “good living” because of impairments (p.258). They might
require additional income to achieve similar functionings as others: for instance, a youth with visual impairment might need to buy assistive technology in order to access a mobile phone and use social media in the same way as their non-disabled peers. Beyond Sen, the CA has become popular with disability scholars who use it to conceptualise disability (see chapter 1) and evaluate various disability related issues. Because the area of interest in the current study is education (higher education), I highlight some of the work done in this area, starting with examples from international literature and later on considering examples specific to Sub-Saharan Africa.

Terzi’s (2005; 2010) writings on justice and equality in education in the UK and the USA has highlighted the prevalent inequalities in policies and practices for students with disabilities and addresses the ‘dilemma of difference’ that is often associated with their provisions. She shows how the CA advances an understanding of disability that is beyond the causal origins of their differences, individual (impairments) or social environment (treat all as same) and instead focuses on their capabilities. In this sense, she argues, the CA provides a relational and multi-dimensional perspective as it considers the specificity of a situation and an individual’s agency (Terzi, 2005). This is a strength in the CA which, she argues, can be used to pursue an educational provision that can be said to be just - in terms of how it responds to the needs of all students.

Hence, disability should be addressed as a matter of social justice, as this has the potential to contribute to the equalisation of the person’s capability to achieve well-being (Terzi, 2005). Although her ideas address the Global North and have not been applied empirically, they are helpful in advancing the disability debate beyond the problematic dual framing that is common in this area even within the context of Kenya. Disability writers who have worked in the Global South (e.g. Grech, 2013 & Miles, 2012) applaud Terzi’s work as a significant contribution to policy and service provision in education, specifically with regards to work towards equal opportunities for students with disabilities and inclusion in general. Further, Miles (2012) suggests that Terzi’s ideas can be applied even in countries in the Global South (e.g. Kenya) which have modelled their education system on countries in the Global North. In this study, understanding the diversities and the context of the YWD that I worked with is helpful in clarifying why they value their activities on social media in the way they do, and the ensuing capabilities as illustrated in chapter 7.

Building on Terzi’s work, Norwich (2014) observes that the CA has provided a “renewed ethical approach and some conceptual resources to re-examine issues in the disability and
education field” (p.16). According to him, the CA offers a “justification for differential resource allocation in terms of a principled framework” and, in this sense, addresses the dilemma of difference; however, it does “not necessarily resolve it in practice” (p.18). Based on Robeyn’s (2003) critique of the CA’s inadequacy in analyzing the social institutions that underlie power and that have influence on opportunities, Norwich is of the view that, on its own, the CA is limited with regards to debates about inclusion and placement of students in special or regular schools in the UK, where inclusion is seen as “a private matter, not a public policy matter” (p.20). This poses tensions with regards to issues of choice and equity for student with disabilities (Norwich, 2014). Although this thesis was not focused on placement of YWD in education, discrimination regarding the same has been observed, including how this influences the activities of YWD on social media in this study (see chapter 6, 7 & 8).

In Sub-Saharan Africa, Mutanga and Walker (2015) analyse the capabilities of students with disabilities in HE in South Africa. They identify a list of 11 capabilities valued by students including voice, aspiration, mobility, cultural value, educational resilience, knowledge and imagination, choice of identity, respect dignity and recognition, social relations and social networks and religious affiliations. Their study illustrates the gap between the students’ lived experiences and what they deem as valuable in HE. The students are faced with wide and complex deprivations compared to their valued capabilities.

This thesis acknowledges their work in the way they have attended to the context and voice of students with disabilities. However, I do not subscribe to their list of capabilities because their interview schedule of questions was predetermined and significantly guided by the list of capabilities in Walker (2006). As Sen exemplifies, the diversities in people and the social structures in which they operate in have significant implications in how they convert their capabilities into functionings. Although their study was based in Sub-Saharan Africa, the HE conditions in South Africa are quite different from those in Kenya. In fact, it is clearly evident from the data that many of the disability services available to their study participants are not present in the three universities where this study took place. Moreover, their study did not address social media use, which is the focus of the current study.
4.4 Capability approach, and social media

Studies specifically exploring experiences of social media using the CA are extremely rare. However, there have been some few studies of ICT for development (ICT4D) which have used the CA to interrogate human development beyond economic gains (e.g. Hatakka & Lagsten, 2012; Kleine, 2010). Overall, these studies argue that these technologies can help people realise their desired outcomes only if development projects focus on what people actually desire, as opposed to what funding agencies want, which is too often the case. Hatakka & Lagsten (2012) used individual interviews and group seminars to evaluate graduate students’ use of internet resources in education and focus on the conversion factors that enable or restrict positive educational outcomes. Kleine (2010) has developed what she calls the ‘choice framework’ which she uses to operationalise choice as an aspect in the CA. In her view, people expand their capabilities through using their agency to negotiate social structures to be able to make choices - the primary development outcome. These studies are helpful in this study as they shed light on how the use of internet resources (including social media) are influenced by personal and contextual factors. Nonetheless, neither of the two studies focused on YWD and social media in particular. The former worked with graduate students originally from the Global South but based in the Global North. On the other hand, the latter worked with microentrepreneurs in telecentres in Chile. Also, the Choice framework is more often applied to system analysis. The contexts in which the studies were undertaken, personal circumstances of participants and the reasons for going online and those of YWD in HE in Kenya are significantly different (Sen, 2009). Thus, it would not be easy to understand what freedoms were enhanced or restricted by the said internet resources.

4.5 The key concepts of the CA relevant for this study

In this section, I discuss some of the main CA constructs that are relevant for this study.

4.5.1 Capabilities (Freedoms)

As illustrated earlier in this chapter, the CA is interested in the substantive freedoms that an individual has to pursue and lead the kind of life that he/she values (Sen, 1999). Sen argues that many capabilities have both intrinsic and instrumental value – hence, freedoms should be considered as the ‘primary information base’ (1993, p.38-39). The importance of capabilities becomes clear when we consider the factors that are central to individual well-being and development as provided in the CA (Sen, 1999). Any effective assessment of
individual well-being should focus on what individuals are able to do and be (functionings), their quality of life and removal of obstacles in their lives to ensure they have enlarged capabilities to live the kind of life that they deem as valuable (Mutanga & Walker, 2015; Robeyns, 2005). Thus, within capabilities, disability is understood as a deprivation of capabilities or functionings that occur from the interaction of an individual’s “(a) personal characteristics (e.g., age impairment), (b) basket of available goods (assets, income) and c) environment (social, economic, political, cultural,)” (Mitra, 2006, p. 237).

Assessing YWD lived experiences and value of social media in this way provides a shift from the dominant traditional models of disability (individualized and social model) which have predetermined causes of disability and, instead, emphasizes the practical opportunities (capabilities) - that is, the full set of opportunities and freedoms available to a person and the role that impairment plays in this set of freedoms and opportunities (Norwich, 2014; Terzi, 2005). For example, in determining the YWD’s lived experiences of social media in this study, the focus was on the freedoms and opportunities they value in using social media, as well as the barriers that hinder them from achieving their valued functionings and whether or not they are free to make the choice of using social media or not. Understanding these capabilities in the light of social media use is crucial because of the tendency to associate social media (and technology in general) with increasing freedoms when, in fact, it can create barriers to freedom - for example, inaccessible social media platforms (Ellis & Kent, 2017).

4.5.2 Human diversity

The acknowledgement that people are not homogeneous is significant to the capability approach and to this study. As Sen (1999 p. 70-71) observes, there are numerous and varied sources of diversity between people ranging from: a) personal heterogeneities, b) differences in social climate, c) environmental variations, d) variations in relational perspectives and e) distribution within a family setting. These interpersonal differences play a significant role in the assessment of individual well-being and well-being outcomes; they influence the way people convert resources into capabilities. Because of these diversities, people’s capabilities cannot be assessed on the basis of the resources available to them only (capabilities) but also in relation to what they are capable of being and doing (functionings) with these resources (Sen, 2009).
Impairment is one of the characteristics of human heterogeneities and may have an effect in the way different YWD experience social media in their context of HE (Terzi, 2005). For example, given two YWD, one blind and the other with physical impairments, the blind student would need a screen reader (assistive technology) to access the phone and thereby use social media, while the other may not need the screen reader to realise the same functioning. Whilst both of them have impairments (diversities) they are not homogenous. Furthermore, even with the knowledge that a screen reader would support his desire to use social media, the blind student might not have the required financial resources to purchase the screen reader, thus adding to his layer of diversity. These differences will have significant impact on this particular youth’s experiences of social media and, by extension, his capability to participate in HE, bearing in mind that this age group are said to live their lives on social media (Selywn, 2011; Tapscott, 2009). The various diversities of the youth in this study have been fully acknowledged (see chapters 6, 7 and 8).

Diversities amongst YWD should, however, not be understood only in terms of deprivations. Research has shown that despite their challenges with social behaviour, some YWD within the autistic spectrum are said to be very good at recognising patterns, highly motivated and focused in pursing certain academic tasks and excellent in computing (e.g. Grandin, 1996; Hastwell, Martin, Baron-Cohen & Harding, 2012). Within the CA, disability is thus viewed as one aspect of human diversity comparable to others - for example, gender and age - all of which interact differently with the social, economic and physical environment to either expand or hinder an individual’s capabilities (Terzi, 2005). Understanding these diversities is crucial to ensuring policies and practices that create opportunities for individuals to pursue and achieve what they value.

4.5.3 Agency and Choice

Agency is fundamental to the CA and is defined as the participatory role of individuals ‘who act and bring about change’ to achieve valuable goals (Sen, 1999, p.19). In considering individual well-being in development, people should be seen as agents, capable of and desiring to act, rather than as “motionless patients” standing in a queue waiting to be developed (Sen, 1999, p.137) or in this case, to be researched on. By paying attention to individual agency, the CA goes beyond the other frameworks of disability: for example, the social model of disability which emphasizes barriers and social constructions but ignores the fact that an individual may have his/her own ways of circumnavigating those barriers. In this study, the agency of YWD is significant and is reflected in my
approach of working with YWD as co-researchers and the participatory methods that I have used as shown in chapter 5.

According to Sen, exercise of agency depends on individuals’ choice of functionings that are valuable to them, even though this choice may not necessarily benefit their personal well-being (Sen, 1999). Sen exemplifies this using the act of fasting and argues that when an individual chooses to fast, the person is exercising his/her agency to pursue a valuable goal although such a choice may not be of positive effect to his/her physical well-being. In this example, fasting, which is a choice not to eat, should be reflected upon (Sen, 1999; 2009). The emphasis here is not on the results that the individual achieves, but on the ability to make a choice and the value attached to this choice. Therefore, any assessment of agency should consider both the actual achievements (functionings) and the effective freedoms (capability).

The consideration of the concept of choice is significant both to the CA and in this study on the lived experiences of social media use by YWD HE. Sen posits that choice is an invaluable aspect of a life worth living, and that the aim of development is to expand an individual’s freedom to choose (1999). Choice is instrumental in the decisions that individuals make; for example, in this thesis, it accounts for YWD use or non-use of social media and the reasons for choosing one over the other and, consequently, the ability to convert this capability (access to social media) into a realised functioning such as chatting with friends.

In exercising their agency, people do not choose and act in isolation, they are situated in the wider social structure which affects the use of their agency (Drèze & Sen 2002; Sen, 1999). So, the options that are available to an individual significantly hinge on interactions with other people and the other conversion factors discussed earlier - hence, the need to consider these factors when analyzing one’s agency. An individual without agency is “forced, oppressed or passive” (Deneulin & Alkire, 2009, p.27). In particular for this study, despite the affordances of social media in the lives of PWD’s, the socio-cultural factors that are evidenced in the everyday offline relationships are often replicated online (Ellis & Kent, 2017; Goggin & Ellis, 2015; Roy & Lewthwaite, 2016; Lewthwaite, 2011), thus will influence the way YWD exercise their agency in using social media. Consideration of such social circumstances is therefore vital to understanding the choices of YWD in their use and value of their activities on social media. I have explored this in chapters 2, 6, 7 and 8.
People who are deprived of material goods and social justice can internalize these harsh circumstances and ‘adapt their preferences’ to lower standards (Sen, 1985; 1999). For example, a YWD who wishes to chat with friends and family on social media after classes but cannot do so because he/she does not have freely available Wi-Fi or money to buy mobile data adjusts his/her desires in the direction of realistic possibilities and is now ‘okay’ by not chatting. Upon adjusting his/her desires this YWD may be satisfied despite not being well-off and his/her agency and well-being may be reduced even if he/she may not be aware of it (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Focusing on adaptive preferences is crucial in this study on YWD especially in the context of Kenya where, as the literature has shown (see chapter 2), ‘harsh circumstances’ (policy and social contexts) restrict their freedoms (Gathoni, 2014; Mugo et al., 2010). These YWD’s use and value for social media should be considered in terms of these circumstances (though not only in these circumstances).

Although Sen does not offer a solution to the adaptive preference debate, his suggestions for ‘careful scrutiny’ of all factors that potentially affect the freedoms that individuals enjoy and have reason to value in assessing of capabilities are crucial (Sen, 1999:9). As observed earlier in the section, this study is concerned with enabling YWD’s voice. Thus, drawing on Sen, I will focus on the choices (e.g. the social media platforms they use and reasons for the same) and freedoms (e.g. access related resources and social relations) available to YWD (or not) in their use of social media; these might provide insights into their freedom to voice.

4.5.4 Conversion factors

Closely related to human diversity is the concept of conversion factors (Sen, 1992); the various aspects that influence people’s ability to convert capabilities into functioning. They are categorised in three main groups including:

- **Personal conversion factors** such as, physical condition, reading skills, gender;
- **Environmental conversion factors** such as, infrastructure, climate, geographical location, institutions; and
- **Social conversion factors** such as, social norms and practices, power relations and public policies (p.19-21, 26-30).

Within the CA, an individual’s conversion factors can be low or high at any given time depending on how they interact at different levels, the individual’s needs/abilities and
context. For example, referring back to the above illustration on the youth with visual impairment, although a smartphone enables the functioning of chatting (e.g. with friends) on social media, the lack of the required screen reader (capability) would hinder the youth’s ability to actualise a desired functioning (chatting). In this case, the youth’s conversion factors (visual impairment and lack of screen reader) are low and make it difficult for him to function in a valued way (Sen, 1992).

A person’s conversion factors can be enhanced/hindered by another and influence his capability set. In the absence of a screen-reader and still desiring to chat on social media, the above youth may request the support of another person (e.g. a roommate) to access social media - albeit with limited privacy. Accordingly, his capability set is shaped by his conversion factors and the roommate’s capabilities (Baylies, 2002; Mitra, 2006 & Sen, 2007). The few studies available in this area, highlight multiple factors that interact to disadvantage/advantage YWD’s use of social media in the context of HE (see, Lewthwaite, 2011; Seale, et al., 2010). Even in a university with similar disability services, the conversion factors that enable positive outcomes for some students are the same ones that restrict others, thus revealing the relationship between individual conversion factors and other factors (Lewthwaite, 2011). Nonetheless, as disability studies show, not all the disadvantages experienced by some YWD may be solved by changes in the environment or availability of resources (Shakespeare, 2014). Sometimes disability may be unavoidable in certain environments even with resources: for example, Shakespeare (2014) reports the case of a blind teacher who is unable to read non-verbal clues in interactions, hence facing challenges interacting with her students in class.

Conversion factors and resources are significantly fundamental to this study just as they are in other studies on the CA and disability in the contexts of developing countries like Kenya (see Baylies, 2002; Mitra et al., 2011). The study notes that not all YWD can convert resources into valued functionings in the same way. To understand the lived experiences of YWD’s social media use, knowledge of the material resources (e.g. a smartphone, Wi-Fi) available to them is not sufficient to tell which functionings are possible for them to actualise; there is also need to know their non-material factors (e.g. social relations, knowledge of social media) and other social and environmental influences that shape their individual choices (Seale, 2013; Robeyns, 2005).
These interpersonal factors will be helpful in assessing their lived experiences of social media, why they value these media and the practical opportunities the media offer in relation to their participation in HE and future aspirations. This ability of the CA to acknowledge the central role of conversion factors in the way people convert their capabilities into functioning and in effect their well-being makes it unique and suitable for this study. Further, unlike other models of disability (social model) which assume that social barriers are things which cause challenges to all PWD, the CA enables us to see that some things are barriers for some PWD and not others and for the former, conversion factors will be different - thus there could be a whole range of outcomes.

4.6 Conclusion

Using the CA to understand YWD lived experiences of social media use and their awareness of these media’s influence on their current and future possibilities of being in the world is appropriate. CA’s multi-dimensional approach to people’s well-beings as shown in the notions of capabilities, human diversity, agency, choice and conversion factors, provides a holistic perspective of what these lived experiences are and why YWD value them. To do so requires deep understanding of the context of Kenya where, as the literature review in this area has shown, there is minimal research in spite of the potential associated with social media in the lives of YWD in HE.

Unlike the other models of disability, which focus on either environmental or individual factors alone, the CA’s ability to bring all these aspects together is significant. It provides a richer understanding of the real opportunities (freedoms) available to YWD in their use of social media and the possible areas of difficulties and, in effect, how these challenges can be mitigated to ensure that YWD realise their valued beings and doings in relation to their use of social media and overall participation in HE. A holistic consideration of the possibilities associated with social media is also fundamental to guidance on policy formulations and institutional practices in relation to participation of YWD in HE and in life afterwards.

In summary, the CA’s openness and broadness for evaluation and analysis enables it to be used for different types of objectives and also facilitates the use of different methods as shown in the next chapter. In the analysis and discussion chapters (7 & 8), I show how the use of the CA in this study has revealed rich insights about YWD lived experiences of use of these media which would not have been as easily possible with other approaches.
Chapter 5: Methodology

5.1 Introduction

In chapter 2, I presented the wider context of Kenya in relation to the educational experiences of youth with disabilities. In chapter 3, I went on to discuss the secondary literature specific to the study and the conceptual framework in chapter 4. The three chapters established a foundation from which to understand the motivation and rationale for the methodology that was developed. In this chapter, I discuss the methodological approach I adopted for the study. I start by discussing the research paradigm in which the methodological approach is situated. Following this, I discuss the research design, data collection process, storage and the analysis. In the later part of the chapter, I highlight the ethical considerations relevant to the study and present some of the challenges faced and the strategies used to overcome them. Finally, I conclude the chapter by showing how the key features of my methodology aligns with the CA.

5.2 Grounding the research

In line with the research questions which seek to understand the detail of YWD lived experiences with social media and what this is enabling them to become and do, and the study’s conceptual framework which emphasizes not only on what people have achieved, but also on the need to understand the processes of moving towards freedom, this study adopts a constructionist phenomenological stance.

5.2.1 Adopting a constructionist perspective

This study is grounded on the belief that knowledge rests within people and is built on the experiences of each individual rather than “eternal truths of some kind” (Crotty, 1998, p.64). Experiences are different and unique since people come from varied historical and cultural backgrounds which affect the way they assign meaning to events or behaviour and from these meanings comes understanding (Bryman, 2008).

There is therefore no single truth, as every person looks at and interprets experiences in their own way and creates their own ‘truth’ on the basis of these experiences (Bassey, 1999; Bryman, 2008). This people-centered perspective accords with the CA which I have used to conceptualise the study. Given the decision to adopt a subjective stance, this study was grounded in constructionism (as an approach to knowledge) and interpretivism (as an
approach to the implementation of the research) (Bryman, 2008). Central to constructionism is the view that knowledge is created by people in their interactions with one another and the society they live in, ‘people perceive and so construe the world in ways which are often similar but not necessarily the same’ (Bassey, 1999, p. 43, emphasis in original). For this reason, there are multiple realities even in relation to the same phenomenon. In studying the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in HE, I was aware that their differences (for example their gender, previous educational experiences, type of impairments, course of study) would influence their individual agency to make choices about what social media platforms to use, their activities on these platforms and why they value them. As a researcher therefore, my main task was to understand these experiences from the perspectives of the participants that I worked with.

Guided by this view of knowledge and the study’s focus (lived experiences), I employed qualitative participatory methods. These approaches ‘centre attention on human elements’ and help researchers to understand what ‘makes our world meaningful for people’ (Brockington and Sullivan, 2003, p.72). They create a deeper level of meaning which can reflect and explore the complexities of a situation (Stake, 1995) and align well with the CA’s emphasis on the need for a holistic approach to understanding people’s lives. The methods provided a way to explore YWD lived experiences of social media use in relation to their social and environmental contexts. They are open-ended and use words, images and texts rather than numbers or statistics and are also sensitive to the needs of the people who participate in the study (Bryman, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Using this approach was therefore helpful; it made it easy to adapt to the individual needs of YWD and elicit their perspectives in a respectful manner.

Undertaking research from such a subjective viewpoint and interpretive focus requires a researcher to be conscious of any bias and preconceptions that may arise in the research process. This was particularly important for me because of my personal interest in areas of inequalities and education, professional background and understanding of service provision for YWD in Kenya where I come from and worked prior to undertaking this PhD study. On the one hand, this was helpful as it meant that I worked as an ‘insider’ (Morrison, 2009, p.104) in the sense that I was familiar with most of the issues that YWD experience within the context of education. Consequently, I was able to form and build relationships with the participants more easily and delve into the essence of issues that were important to them in candid conversations that would not have been easily realised by an ‘outsider’ (Morrison,
2009, p. 104). Still, I was keen not to allow my own views to dominate the youth’s perspectives and lived experiences.

On the other hand, I was also an outsider as I am not a youth and neither do I have a disability. Most of the youth did not seem to perceive this as an impediment to their participation; however, I observed signs of uneasiness with two participants\(^9\) in the initial stages of data collection. Although they did not explicitly raise any concerns, I was able to tell that they were avoiding some of my probes. In these two occasions, I reminded the participants that they were free not to respond to any probe they felt uncomfortable with. I then changed the topic, and this did not appear to hinder unduly either conversation. As I continued to engage with them in the research process, our rapport had been enhanced to the extent that the two revisited the incidences in later conversations as highlighted below:

That is why I did not mention my mother during the mapping… it is a sad story. I miss her. She is the only one who was really concerned about my health and you know, in our home area there are some beliefs…I don’t talk about it a lot but some of my friends know it… But you have also become my friend that is why I have told you’ (Ken, LHI, 2017).

You know you were asking about things that I normally don’t like sharing that is why I was avoiding it... There is nothing much to talk about my family…how do you talk about people who don’t recognize you? (Mtawala, LHI, 2017).

In both cases, the two participants were concerned that I was not from their tribe\(^10\) and hence feared I would view them differently. The fact that they recalled these incidences and even went ahead to share further information on the same unprompted was a sign that I had gained trust with them and that I was more of an insider than an outsider.

Reflecting upon my position and decisions throughout the research process has been useful. It has allowed me not only to collect rich and in-depth data but also to do so while creating an interesting and empowering relationship with the youth – these are significant

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\(^9\) This happened during the initial social media map activity with each of them when I probed to get clarifications about their social networks. While Ken had written ‘family’ it was not clear the people who made up his family. Mtawala on the other hand had not captured family on his map so I thought they were not on social media. I was therefore probing to find out how he communicates with them.

\(^10\) Some tribes in Kenya still have significant cultural beliefs, stereotypes and stigma about disability. Ken and Mtawala come from two such tribes hence their initial mistrust. During the writing up of this thesis, the BBC featured a story on the same. See the link https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-45670750
strengths of qualitative approaches (Bryman, 2008; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). More details on researcher positionality is provided in section 5.8. As discussed in chapter 4, I am using the CA to conceptualise this study. Within the CA, Robeyns (2017) has provided a useful guide to using the approach empirically. She defines five epistemological goals with which to align a given study and recommends suitable methodologies and the role of capabilities and functionings within each goal as shown in table 5.1.

Table 5.1: An adapted guide to the empirical use of the capability approach from Robeyns (2017, p. 32)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Epistemic goal</th>
<th>Methodology/discipline</th>
<th>Role of functionings and capabilities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Normative theories</td>
<td>Philosophy, in particular ethics and normative political</td>
<td>The metric/currency in the interpersonal comparisons of advantage that are</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>philosophy</td>
<td>entailed in the value that is being analysed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Normative applied analysis including policy design</td>
<td>Applied ethics and normative strands in the social sciences</td>
<td>A metric of individual advantage that is part of the applied normative analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Welfare/quality of life measurement</td>
<td>Quantitative empirical strands within various humanities</td>
<td>Social indicators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and social sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thick description/descriptive analysis</td>
<td>Qualitative empirical strands within various humanities</td>
<td>Elements of narratives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and social sciences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding the nature of certain ideas,</td>
<td>Conceptual analysis</td>
<td>Used as part of the conceptualisation of the idea or notion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>practices, notions (other than the values in the</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>normative theories)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

This thesis is in line with her fourth epistemological goal of thick description and descriptive analysis and supports the decision to use phenomenology and participatory approaches to data collection which I now turn to.

5.2.2 Phenomenological research

To capture YWD lived experiences of social media use and understand their perspectives, phenomenological research was appropriate. It primarily focuses on producing comprehensive descriptions of a particular phenomenon; drawing on people’s lived experiences within a given context (Christensen, Johnson & Turner, 2010). Phenomenology is rooted in the 20th century work of philosopher Husserl, mainly due to his dissatisfaction with the then dominant positivist view of knowledge (Crotty, 1996). His
arguments were premised on the view that science needed to focus beyond the physical world and embrace human experience in the understanding of knowledge.

Consequently, the key question that phenomenology researchers ask is of the form: “What are the meanings, structures and essences of the lived experience of (a specific phenomenon) by individuals experiencing it?” (Simon, 2011, p.2). To understand such meaning, phenomenology attempts to get below the surface of perceptions, asking the what, the how and the why of the experience, to expose the implicit structure and meaning of such experiences (Moustakas, 1994, emphasis mine). In this study, the focus was to understand the individual experiences of YWD use of social media, how individual YWD made sense of their experiences and the meanings they attached to these experiences. This included how they constructed and interpreted social media for both educational and social life within the context of HE.

Phenomenology uses various qualitative methods including individual oral and/or written histories or their aesthetic expressions such as pieces of art, photographs or other cultural artefacts. Through such methods, a researcher is able to describe the themes of the experience based on reflection and interpretation of an individual participant’s story (Moustakas, 1994). In this way, phenomenological research is seen to provide a view of experience from the inside. It was thus suited for this research as it acknowledges individual YWD varied experiences - for example, in relation to their gender, impairments, previous educational experiences, course of study at HE and economic status, all of which influence the way they experience social media and, hence, the meaning they attach to these experiences. Recognizing that YWD are not a homogenous group was crucial and helpful when working with them; it provided flexibility to work with the youth according to their individual needs and therefore treating their lived experiences as unique and independent voices. This was important because I did not want to generalize their experiences of disability.

Overall, enabling YWD voice was central to this study because, as discussed in the study’s setting in chapter 2, rarely are their voices represented on issues concerning their lives in Kenya. A focus on phenomenology with its emphasis on describing people’s experiences provided the platform to do this. In particular, participatory methods were used to collect data, build rich descriptions and capture the voices of YWD and allow themes and issues to emerge from the experiences of the youth.
5.3 Research design.

In this section, I discuss the key aspects of the research design including the decisions relating to the nature of the participatory research undertaken with YWD and the research sites; I also introduce the participants and the timing of the study, methods of data collection and analysis. Research position and ethical considerations will also be discussed.

5.3.1 Participatory Research

Phenomenological research acknowledges the need to include participants in the research not only as ‘objects of enquiry’ but, most importantly, as active participants in the research process, providing unique insights into their own reality (Atkinson, 2004). This was therefore a participatory research with YWD rather than on YWD (Heron & Reason, 2001). This was significant because YWD’s voice was at the heart of this research. Working with YWD in this study as co-researchers was not only helpful in enabling their voice but also crucial in seeking to address issues of power imbalance often noted in disability research (Singal, 2010). Studies in the area of social media and marginalized groups also caution on the need to ensure that research with ‘digitally left-out’ groups keep people central in their project objectives to minimize the risk of contributing further marginalisations and exclusions (Ellis & Kent, 2011; Goggin & Ellis, 2015).

Participatory research has been conceptualised differently depending on the degree of participants’ involvement. With regards to PWD experiences of participatory research, Radermacher (2006) proposes various degrees that participants can be involved in a research project as shown in figure 5.1. Her work has influenced scholars researching on disability and technology such as Lewthwaite, (2011) and Seale et al., (2008).
She recommends a non-hierarchical formulation of participant involvement that is contextually located:

Thinking of participation as non-hierarchical avoids the common assumption that there is an ‘ideal’ form of participation - that of having and being in total control. [...] What becomes important, therefore, is that people have access to and are provided with opportunities to participate in whatever way they desire, and that they have a choice to participate in the first place. (Radermacher, 2006: 25).

In line with her conceptualisation, this study is researcher-initiated, with some consultations with the youth participants. Although they were not involved in every step of
the planning and implementation, YWD were *consulted and informed* and took active roles in parts of the research (Radermacher, 2006). This aligned well with the motivation and purpose of the study. As discussed in chapter 2 and 3, I formulated the research questions following the gap in the literature with regards to the invisibility of YWD voices on issues that pertain to their education and other aspects of life in Kenya including research on social media. In undertaking the research therefore, it was not my intention to decide what the youth may value on their engagement on social media or how to express themselves. Rather, I acknowledged and created space for YWD voices to be heard and enhanced in the research process.

I developed participatory methods including conversational interviews, social media maps, life history interviews, and self-directed photography project and social media diaries. Besides being youth friendly, the methods were sensitive to their individual differences. Participants chose the methods they preferred to use and gave suggestions on how best to adjust these methods to fit their individual needs. In this way, they were able to offer technical expertise as well as new modes of data collection. They also decided on what information they wanted to share with me and affirmed that they would like to keep up to date with the research and its progress.

In December 2017, I invited all the seven youth for an individual face to face feedback meeting to confirm the data after the analysis. Six of them took up the offer and met with me on various dates and venues in Nairobi. I have also shared the final results of the study with all of them personally and through email. I am in ongoing communication with most of the youth through WhatsApp and Facebook. They update me on their progress on various aspects of their lives. I advise them on available opportunities known to me which they can take up to better their lives according to individual interests.

This research therefore meets Radermacher’s (2006) five ‘conditions’ necessary to support genuine participation. These are:

1. People will participate if they feel the issue or activity is important;
2. People must feel that their action will make a difference;
3. Different forms of participation must be acknowledged and valued;
4. People must be enabled to participate, and supported in their participation; and
5. Structures and processes must not be alienating (Radermacher, 2006; 105).
Working with the participants in this way was significant for building relationships and to make the research relevant to them; it provided an opportunity for fostering their wellbeing, agency and participation. In our ongoing communication with them, participants have expressed how their participation in the research gave them a platform to be who they are and at the same time express themselves freely. Most of them have also shared how our conversations have enhanced their outlook on life and the various ways they are using social media to follow through some of their aspirations\(^{11}\). Without their active participation and enthusiasm for the research, it would have been impossible to gather the rich insights that have ensued in this thesis. I expound on this in section 5.5.

5.3.2 The three Universities

As outlined in chapter 2, YWD are significantly underrepresented in HE in Kenya. The few who make the transition are mostly placed in universities which are perceived to be better developed in terms of built environment and service provision and would therefore make it easier for YWD to study (Opini, 2012). These universities are mainly concentrated within Nairobi (the capital city) and the neighbouring Kiambu County. For this reason, I decided to look for and work with volunteer participants in any university within the two counties.

Whilst I managed to get volunteers from three universities within Nairobi County, data collection took place within and outside the universities. This is because of a prolonged lecturers’ strike\(^{12}\) which affected learning thus forcing many students to go back home. Participants reported that this was a significant way of saving their living allowance so that they could spend it later when studies resumed. In addition, others viewed this as a valued opportunity to work short-term jobs to supplement their living allowances and to support their families instead of idling around. This necessitated me to travel up-country to follow-up with some of the participants. I discuss the three universities here and the recruitment process thereafter in section 5.4.

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\(^{11}\)For example, Rukia has shared how her continued engagement on social media has opened up an opportunity to host a TV program in one of the media houses. In June 2018 and March 2019, she was invited to London for a training on youth citizenship and participation through social media by Leonard Cheshire disability. At the time of writing up this thesis, she and Ben have stood and been elected as student leaders in their respective universities. Ken has joined a social media research group started at their university in 2018; we exchange ideas and information on the same.

\(^{12}\)The lecturers were on/ off strike on various dates from January to March 2017

**University A**

This is one of the largest public universities in Kenya and amongst the first to be established. According to its website, it is a collegiate research university with a student population of about 80,000 at the time of data collection. Most of these are undergraduates. Students who were registered as having a disability were about 150 students\(^{13}\). The majority of students declaring disability have physical, visual and hearing impairments respectively. The University has ten campuses in different parts of the city and the country. Although the university has a disability policy on its website, it is not possible to tell how well students are provided for in the various campuses. The policy shows that it admits and provides for the needs of students with visual, hearing and physical disabilities.

In the law campus where two of the study participants (Muthee and Ben) are based, there are about 2000 registered undergraduate students *eight of whom* have declared disability. With the exception of YWD, accommodation in this campus is primarily reserved for third year and fourth year students - this is when they undertake their practicums. The rest of the students reside in the main campus which is about six miles away or in private accommodation off-campus. The *eight* YWD studying law were accommodated in designated rooms on the ground floor of a three-storey hostel. Whilst the modified rooms can be seen as helpful, having all YWD on the ground floor in one building implies that they have no options to choose where they want to live. Furthermore, this marks them as different (Terzi, 2005).

The main pathways as well as the teaching and administrative buildings were easily accessible to students with mobility impairments and white cane users. Wi-Fi was freely available in the university. There were braille reading resources in the library and some computers were adapted. Laptops were also provided but these were not adapted; students have to make their own arrangements for the required AT. As shown in chapter 6, some of these (e.g. JAWS) were very costly and acquiring them was extremely hard for the blind students who needed them. Participants’ data shows that the campus had readily available IT services and support for all YWD depending on individual needs. However, to be able to access these services, students were required to declare their disability on admission.

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\(^{13}\) These are the estimates given by the special needs student representative in an informal conversation with him during the scoping study. According to him the university did not have the exact numbers. He was one of the study participants. As shown in chapter 2, such lack of official data on YWD is common even with official government records at the Ministry of Education.
This can be challenging for students who do not wish to declare their status (Mutanga and Walker, 2015). Figures 5.2 to 5.5 show photographs of various parts of the campus.

Figure 5.2 - Photograph of a path leading to students’ accommodation

Figure 5.3 Photograph of a ramp next to stairs inside the students’ accommodation
Figure 5. 4: Photograph of a ramp leading to lecture halls and offices

Figure 5. 5 Photograph of a ramp leading to the library
University B

This is a mid-sized private university located in an upmarket area within Nairobi. Until 2014 when the government centralised admissions to all universities, the university admitted its own students, all of whom are self-sponsored. At the time of data collection in 2017, the university website showed that there was a total population of 7005 students, the majority of whom were undergraduates. It also indicated that the university had the biggest population of foreign students compared to all other universities in the country. The website does not show information relating to admission of students with disabilities but communication with the two study participants (Rukia and Ken) based here shows that only students with mobility impairments are admitted at the university. They were about 20 in total at the time of interviewing. Participants’ data (chapter 6) shows that the university had no disability policy and that accommodation within the university was significantly expensive. About half the student population live in university accommodation while others either rent flats close to the university or commute from home. Only three students with disabilities commute from their homes (mostly in private cars), the majority live in rental accommodation neighbouring the university.

The main road/path from some of the students’ accommodation to the university was not tarmacked and had many potholes, which posed accessibility problems to users with mobility challenges. Whilst the road from the gate to various parts of the university was tarmacked, it had several huge bumps which were not easily navigable for wheelchair users. The library had a ramp but the two participants—both of whom use wheelchairs—expressed concern about navigating it without support. Some of the newer lecture halls had functional lifts but the others did not. At the time of data collection, there were media reports about a student who had sued the university because of being unable to access a class. Figures 5.6 - 5.8 shows photographs of different parts of the university including key pathways.
Figure 5. 6-Photograph of the main path/road from participant’s accommodation to the University

Figure 5. 7 Photograph of road/path leading to lecture halls and offices
University C

This is another large collegiate public university with eleven campuses spread across the city and other parts of the country. The main campus, where three of the study participants (Neema, Mtawala & Petero) were based, is in Nairobi. According to its website, this university has the highest proportion of students with disabilities compared to other universities in the country. At the time of data collection, the number of students identified as having a disability was approximately 22014 out of the total 78,000 students spread across the various campuses. Like University A, undergraduates were the majority. Although it was not possible to tell the exact representation by category, students with visual impairments were said to be the highest followed by those with physical impairments and hearing impairments respectively.

The university has a Directorate of Disability Services (DODS) whose vision is to “mainstream Disability in all operations of the university” (online). The DODS offices are located close to some disability-friendly single-storey hostels where all students with

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14 These estimates were given by Mtawala, the special needs student representative and one of the study participants.
disabilities were accommodated. Non-disabled students were also accommodated in these hostels. Whilst the pathways connecting these hostels were easy to navigate, other student halls and facilities were inaccessible for students with mobility impairments. The university has shuttle services for students with impairments, but participants’ data show that the shuttles were unreliable during class times as demand was high. Because the main campus where the study took place covers a large piece of land, this can be challenging for some YWD. Furthermore, the shuttles did not operate during the weekends. But for the newer buildings, most of the teaching and administration buildings were not easily accessible. The library was accessible via a ramp and a lift. Wi-Fi is freely available although this is limited to specific places within the campus. The university offers IT services and support, including Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) magnifiers, but participants’ data shows that these are only provided in the library. Figures 5.9 - 5.11 illustrates some of the main buildings and pathways at the campus.

Figure 5. 9: Photograph of a key path leading to classes and offices in the university.
Figure 5. 10- Photograph of a ramp on the entrance into one of the students’ accommodation.

Figure 5. 11- Photograph of one of the lecture halls
5.4 Phased approach to data collection

Although data was collected in three phases, as shown in the table below, communication with participants was ongoing throughout the study.

Table 5.2: Schedule showing how data was collected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timing</th>
<th>Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Dec 2016- Jan 2017 | Scoping study in Nairobi:  
  - Exploratory study to recruit potential participants for the in-depth study  
  - Discussions with participants on valued ways they could participate in the research  
  - Application of research permits and other study logistics. |
| February-April 2017 | Field work within and outside Nairobi  
  - Social media maps  
  - Social media diaries  
  - Life-story interviews  
  - Self-directed photography project  
  - Follow-up meetings |
| Dec 2017 | Face to face confirmation of data with individual participants. |
| Dec 2018 | Feedback on thesis findings |

5.4.1 Phase 1: Scoping study

I undertook a scoping study as shown on table 5.2 above. The aim of the scoping study was threefold: first to identify potential participants and start interactions with them before they went home for the Christmas holiday. Secondly, I used the opportunity to assess the suitability of the planned research methods after consultation with study volunteers. I also attended to other logistics about the study including seeking the necessary study permissions from the National Commission for Science, Technology and Innovation (NACOSTI) (Appendix 2).
5.4.1.1 Participant recruitment

In phenomenology, participants are selected purposefully to “yield the most information about the phenomenon of interest” (Merriam, 2009, p.20). As highlighted earlier, Universities within Nairobi and Kiambu had been earmarked as sites with a high likelihood of finding volunteers. These were students that were willing to work with me on this study (below I explain how they were recruited). Within these Universities, I sought to work with volunteers who were already using social media and self-identified as having a disability. Although working with volunteers was not the best way to look for participants, especially in a population known to be least represented in HE, previous experience during my MPhil studies (Gathoni, 2014) had shown that, sometimes, university gatekeepers had their own reasons for putting forward certain participants. Therefore, to avoid the likelihood of working with participants who would steer data in a particular way, I chose to work with willing volunteers (Merriam, 1998). I sought consent with all of them during the scoping study and before commencing data collection. I detail this later in the ethics section.

Before the scoping study, I had established contact with a potential participant (Ben) through a pre-existing Facebook connection. We both belong to a Facebook group which was initially set up as a knowledge sharing and support network for PWD, but later invited disability service providers to join. I contacted Ben as I knew that he was a student in one of the Universities in Nairobi. After I had explained about the purpose of the study he expressed willingness to take part and also shared his WhatsApp number as this was his preferred mode of communication. This enabled me to have an ongoing communication with him as I continued with the study preparations. I also requested him to reach out for more volunteers on my behalf.

During the scoping study, I held my first face to face informal conversation with Ben in a café at his campus after classes. During this meeting, Ben introduced me to Muthee, another YWD and a colleague in the same campus. After sharing the broad details of the study and the proposed methods, Muthee agreed to participate and thus shared his details with me. At the end of the meeting, Ben informed me about an upcoming event in one of the Universities where YWD within Nairobi had been invited for the launch of a report on disability policies in Kenyan Universities. Although the forum was mainly by invitation, getting access was not difficult after I introduced myself to the organizers through email. At this event, I met some YWD both individually and in groups and informed them about my study. Seven interested youth shared their names and preferred contact details with a
view to volunteer in the study. I emailed all the study details to the seven and they emailed back with their intention to participate.

However, when the study commenced, three of them dropped out during the third week following the prolonged lecturers’ strike which affected learning. As mentioned earlier, many students left campus and went back home. Whilst I was willing to follow-up with all the volunteers, the contact numbers given by these three were not reachable. Subsequently, four of the seven volunteers-in addition to Ben and Muthee - participated with an additional one joining two weeks after the study had started in response to an invitation by one of the other participants. Thus, in total I worked with seven volunteers all of whom were undergraduates. I briefly introduce them in table 5.3. Detailed accounts of each of them are provided in chapter 6.
Table 5.3: Participants’ profile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name/age</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Uni*</th>
<th>YoS**</th>
<th>Course of study</th>
<th>Type of impairment</th>
<th>Social media used</th>
<th>Home County</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Blind</td>
<td>WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, Instagram &amp; Messenger</td>
<td>Siaya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 years</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muthee</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td>Law</td>
<td>Low Vision</td>
<td>WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, Instagram &amp; YouTube</td>
<td>Nyeri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rukia</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>1st Year</td>
<td>Journalism/ International Relations</td>
<td>Cerebral Palsy uses wheelchair</td>
<td>WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, YouTube &amp; Twitter</td>
<td>Nairobi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td>Information Technology</td>
<td>Physical impairment (brittle bones) uses wheelchair</td>
<td>WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Quora, &amp; LinkedIn</td>
<td>Machakos</td>
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<tr>
<td>22 years</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mtawala</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>4th Year</td>
<td>Special Needs Education/ History</td>
<td>Low vision</td>
<td>WhatsApp, Facebook &amp; Google+</td>
<td>Trans-Mara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neema</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>3rd Year</td>
<td>History/ Christian Religious Education</td>
<td>Cerebral Palsy (Spina bifida) uses wheelchair</td>
<td>WhatsApp, Facebook &amp; YouTube</td>
<td>Laikipia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Petero</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>2nd Year</td>
<td>Environmental Science/ Community Development</td>
<td>Physical impairment. (amputee)</td>
<td>WhatsApp, Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Quora, Google+, &amp; LinkedIn</td>
<td>Nakuru</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21 years</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Uni = University ** YoR = Year of study

5.4.1.2 Piloting of methods

As highlighted earlier, the other main reason for undertaking the scoping study was to assess the appropriateness of the planned research methods after consultation with the study volunteers. Whilst I had hoped to do so with a few of the volunteers, the lecturers’
strike and the uncertainties of having enough participants to volunteer (after it became obvious that three were unreachable by phone or social media) meant that I needed to make changes especially with regards to evaluating the methods. My hope was that if I found more than ten volunteers, then I would try out the methods with some of them. I therefore requested a student without disability who was within reach and known to me to volunteer. As most of the potential participants with physical impairments had already mentioned that they had no problems with writing or any tasks involving the use of their hands, it was felt that a non-disabled student would therefore provide useful feedback first. Although I tried to get additional volunteers who would be willing to take part in trying the methods the uncertainties with the lecturers’ strike made it difficult to recruit. After the volunteer had taken part in all the other activities, and given feedback, after consultations with my supervisors, I decided to try out the same with another volunteer student with visual impairment within the Open University whom I contacted and met upon my return from Kenya. Based on the findings of these two volunteers, I managed to prepare and gather multiple resources that would help facilitate the research once it commenced depending on individual needs of the participants.

5.5 Data collection methods

I used multiple data sources including:

- Informal conversations,
- Social media maps,
- Life-story interviews and a,
- Self-directed photography project.

These methods placed the voice of the youth at the centre of the process of data generation (Stake, 1995). Using multiple methods was time consuming in preparation, but it helped to compensate for the strengths and weaknesses of each of them (Merriam, 1998). Multiple methods provide a holistic picture of the experience being sought and are also crucial in building confidence in the accuracy of research findings (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Bryman, 2008). I also kept a research diary to note my reflections and perspectives on the research process as it unfolded. The diary proved particularly significant when I needed to follow-up with any participant for clarifications or further information. It has also been useful in helping me recall some of the main activities that happened along the way, including how decisions were made. Before discussing how each of these methods were
used, I highlight how the initial data collection process unfolded, showing some of the changes that were made along the way, the justifications and implications of the same.

5.5.1 Scheduling the data collection process

As highlighted earlier, while I had planned that data collection would take place within the three universities, the lecturers’ strike paralysed learning in all public universities. Many students therefore went back home, including three of my study participants - Neema, Petero and Muthee. As they were still keen to participate, we planned for me to visit them and continue with the data collection once they were settled. Later, the three were able to update me on convenient dates and acceptable meeting venues. But for the initial conversations and the social media mapping sessions which were held in preferred venues in their respective universities, for the most part, data collection with Neema and Muthee took place in different coffee shops where they felt comfortable near their home areas in Laikipia and Nyeri respectively, while our meetings with Petero were held in a local secondary school in Njoro where he was volunteering as a teacher during the strike.

The changes required consultation and rescheduling planned meetings with Rukia and Ken who are in the private university and thus were not affected by the strike, as well as Mtawala and Ben who, though affected, chose to remain in their respective campuses. Implementing these changes was not without its challenges, especially on my part as it required flexibility to factor in extra travels in some particularly hard to reach areas and having to spend nights away from Nairobi which was my established base of operation during the fieldwork. Also, for Neema, Muthee and Petero, being away from campus meant that they would not have access to the readily available Wi-Fi. To ensure ongoing communication and to convey my value for their experiences, I gave each of them an additional £10 to buy data bundles for internet connection.

All these changes had implications on time and financial resources but at the end of it, the data and the way the process impacted the youth was worth it. It provided opportunities to interact with the participants even more and build our relationships together. On my part, flexibility was an important demonstration to the participants of the mutual commitment to the research process and determination to value their experiences despite the mentioned challenges. Travelling upcountry gave me a glimpse into the challenges that the three participants experience in their journeys to and from the university. It also gave me insights into life in their home areas, where there are no adaptations in the physical
environment to enable their inclusion in the local communal areas where I often met them. It supported my choice of using the CA in this research with YWD who are diverse, and was eye opening with regards to how problematic it would have been to use the social model of disability in this thesis as it ignores the place of impairment in disability. Once, I had developed some sense of stability with the schedule, data collection commenced. In addition to the initial introduction conversations held up earlier with the youth during the recruitment process, each of them participated in all the activities mentioned in section 5.5 above and which I now turn to.

5.5.2 Social media maps (SMM)

Social mapping is a well-established interactive visual tool for eliciting data and building more extensive dialogue and relationships with participants (Chambers, 2007). Social mapping can be done in different ways depending on the research aims and using different items, including plain sketching papers, boards, pens, chalk or post-it notes. Since I was interested in the lived experiences of social media use, the CA approach was useful in helping understand the nuances of how they used social media and what this meant to them. I held individual social media mapping sessions with participants so as to understand with whom and why they communicated via social media. Although I had previously explained about the social media maps during our initial conversations with each individual youth, prior to the sessions, I contacted the youth whom I was going to meet, reminding them about the planned activity. Alerting them was important in case any modifications and/or extra resources were needed before I met them. Because they had different impairments, I wanted to ensure that a) as much as possible all of them were included in the activity b) I knew how best to include them in the activity without assuming that the use of paper, marking pens and post it notes would be acceptable to each of them. Participants were also allowed to be accompanied by any trusted friend or assistant although any such companion was not to participate in the sessions unless the participant asked them to. This was important to avoid the risk of them ‘taking over’ from the participants (See Appendix 3 for the detailed consent form).

I started the sessions by showing them a copy of the social media map done during the scoping study. As Ben is blind, he allowed me to explain it to him. To do the map, I provided each participant with large blank sheets of paper and asked them to:

- Draw a sketch/ place a model of themselves in the middle of the paper.
• Draw/indicate in any acceptable manner a social media map of key people, things, places and institutions that that had most influence on their lives. The mapping was to be done around their sketch. Instructions on the proximity of these items to their sketch were left open. This session was key in providing data on their online and offline social networks and helped in reflections on their opportunities and barriers. All the sessions were audio recorded with permission. After the instructions were clear to the participant, I allowed them time to do the map. Mapping took about 30 minutes, with short interruptions halfway through the session where I sought clarifications with participants. Participants were also free to ask questions where they were not clear. While all the seven participants took part in the social media map activity, there were some modifications for Ben. Initially, he audio-recorded his map, using his phone prior to our meeting; afterwards, he asked me to sketch as he explained the various people, networks and institutions that had influenced him, showing the various social media platforms he used with each of them.

The sessions were held in public open areas, including empty classrooms, student common areas and coffee shops where participants felt comfortable. After the mapping was done, I held an unstructured interview with each participant to understand who was who in their maps. Although the interview was unstructured, the guiding ideas involved finding out the social media platforms used with each of the identified people/networks, frequency of the activities, usefulness and the flow of the same; this helped in finding out who, between the participant and the identified person/network, had initiated the communication and why. The conversations lasted between 20 and 45 minutes, depending on the map and how much the participant was willing to share. After the sessions I requested to take the maps for my records. Although none of them objected, Ken felt that he would have done a better map on a computer and thus asked to be allowed to redo it during his own time and email it - which he did. The social media map provided participants time to reflect on their social relations and networks and their influence in their lives. Data from these sessions provided the foundation for the life history interviews. Figures 5.12 and 5.13 shows two social media maps from two participants.
Figure 5.12- Rukia’s social media map
Life history interviews (LHI)

Life history interviews are helpful in capturing the ‘voices’ of people with disabilities in addition to bringing meaning to their lives (Atkinson, 2004). These provided an opportunity to gather detailed information on the participants’ past and present educational experiences in HE. This was useful in enhancing understanding of insights gathered through the social media map. It also provided an opportunity to prompt participants to find out if social media had a role to play in their future. On average, I conducted three life history interviews with each of the seven youth. This was done through several semi-
structured open-ended interviews, mainly to prompt the participants for details, thus allowing them to keep telling the stories in their own terms of reference (Rose & Grosvenor, 2001).

The interviews were sequential and spread over the research period. In this way, it was possible to see how participants’ ideas and value for social media changed over time. Interview length varied, but, on average sessions lasted between 30 to 90 minutes. All sessions were recorded using a digital recorder with permissions. I also took brief notes in areas that I felt needed further clarifications later with the participant. Initial sessions were guided by data from the social media map, after which participants were probed following from their flow of conversation. I was interested in specific happenings or significant episodes in their lives and how these events had influenced them. This was particularly important given the diversities of the youth. To ensure recall and reflection on key events in their lives, the youth were free to use either Swahili or English. As I am a Swahili speaker myself, this worked well for those who chose to use it even though most of the time participants drew holistically on their language resources using English, Swahili and Sheng - a slang common with the youth - as they felt comfortable narrating some of their difficult experiences in this way. Having worked with youth in the past this did not pose a challenge to me - in fact, it was an important pointer that I had gained trust with them. Allowing the youth to draw on their multiple language resources to express themselves in the way they valued was crucial in enabling their freedom as co-researchers and is an important feature of this study.

Stories are criticized as being highly personalized and subjective but, as Hitchcock and Hughes (1995, p. 208) observe, “producing detailed personal accounts is precisely what they are meant to”. The life histories produced significant data on the youths’ educational experiences. Understanding these experiences provided a crucial link to these youths’ activities on social media. One key challenge with the life histories is the amount of data produced. Whilst this was time consuming to gather, transcribe and analyse, at the end, the rich insights gathered were worth the time spent.

5.5.4 Self-directed photography activity (PA)

This self-directed photography (Hartley, 2012, p.135) activity gave the youth an opportunity to use visual methods and was quite appealing to them. Photographs provide a meaningful way to engage youth as co-researchers to represent and reflect on their own
experiences in educational research (Miles & Howes, 2015) as “every image tells a story, more than meets the eye and provides for fresh insights about people’s experiences” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013, p. 200). Photography has been used in research on inclusion/exclusion in education with youth in the Global South (for example, Miles, 2011; Miles & Kaplan, 2005; Zehle, 2015). I had disposable cameras for the activity, but the youth were allowed to use their phone cameras if they wanted to. The cameras were more popular with all of them not only because these were new to them but also because they were eager to learn how to use them and to see what the photographs would look like. A short session on how to use the disposable cameras was given to individual youth, after which they were asked to take photographs of what social media meant to them - instructions were deliberately left open. In line with participatory nature of the study, this aimed at eliciting participants’ perspectives on their lived experiences of social media use in a way that enabled them to decide what information they wanted to share.

The project took place over a period of two weeks to ensure participants had sufficient time to take photos. As the cameras were given at different times, soon after the life history sessions, I made individual arrangements with the youth about when to collect the cameras for processing of the pictures. All the photos were returned to the participants unopened. They were advised to sort them and only share the photos they wished to for the research and keep the rest. Participants were also requested to caption the photos that they decided to share after which I invited them to talk about these photos. These sessions took between 30-45 minutes. This project engaged their interest and enabled them to share about their experiences of social media beyond what they had said in the previous interviews. It was transformative in the way the youth used metaphors alongside the photos to express their thoughts and capture their development through social media. These are detailed in chapter 6 and 7. Overall, on their own, the images lacked meaning; the significance of the photographs lay in the data that they created on reflection (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Miles & Howes 2015). In addition to providing new and distinct data, the photography project was an additional method which provided rigour to my study. This helped in developing deeper understanding of individual youth’s lived experiences of social media use.

5.5.5 Social Media Diary (SMD)

In addition to the other data collection methods, participants were requested to keep a social media diary showing the platforms they had accessed, time spent and a brief on the type of activity they were participating in. This was mainly to help them recollect the
events and facilitate our discussion when I met them. Apart from one handwritten diary, all the others were noted on their phones and shared via WhatsApp on a weekly basis.

5.5.6 Confirming collected data with participants

I had initially planned to have an online focus group to provide opportunity for the youth to confirm the data. This, however, changed after the data collection and the initial analysis; I decided to confirm the data with individual youth. I reasoned that while the participants were all YWD and in HE, many of them did not know each other and thus I would lose some of the online focus group time as they started to get to know each other and develop the confidence to speak within the group. It would also have resulted in a loss of anonymity if they all participated in the group. Furthermore, while they had several common valued things in their use of social media, individually, they each had raised varied issues which mattered to them reflecting their different profiles and intersectionalities. I therefore opted to ‘tailor’ the follow-up interviews so as to pick up and develop on these issues further with individual participants. This enriched the data even more although it also required a lot more work preparing and undertaking. In the end the richness of the data collected was worth the extra time spent doing individual follow-ups.

5.6 Data transcription and Analysis

Analyzing qualitative data is often problematic not only because of the amount of data generated but also in forming conclusions that have broader significance (Bryman, 2008). To manage this, a ‘narrative analysis’ approach was used. It involved bringing all the data into a coherent whole for each participant and then analysis, using the CA concepts identified in chapter 4 - such as agency freedom, agency goals, and conversion factors that supported participants’ activities on social media. In particular, I was interested in how participants were exercising their agency on social media, the choice of activities they were involved in, whom they were engaging with and why, the value they attached to their activities and presence online as well as the factors that were enabling/hindering their ability to pursue the valued freedoms and goals. The themes that emerged were therefore both inductive and deductive - emerging from the data as well as being informed by the CA (Bryman, 2008; Merriam, 1998).

To begin with, I spent time listening to the recordings after the initial interviews with each participant and also referred back to my field notes. This helped me familiarize myself with the data from the onset and identify initial themes without detailed analysis. After all
the data was collected, verbatim transcription was undertaken by listening and typing notes on Microsoft word. Although all data was transcribed in English, care was taken to ensure that the original meanings of words and concepts were not lost during the translation. I have retained the original interviews and in reporting the data, there are instances where I have used unedited direct words/quotes from participants so as to retain the richness of the language as used and allow their views to be fully articulated. This is in line with Stake’s (1995) observations on the need to provide a vivid account of data to maximise the reader’s encounter with same. In such cases, a loose English translation has been provided in square brackets.

After typing the notes, open coding of the data was done on the hard copies of the transcripts. This iterative process allowed me to look for any recurring topics, similarities and differences of experiences in participants’ data as well as any unfamiliar theme in relation to the data, the research questions and the CA framework as recommended by Bryman (2008). Afterwards, colour coding was used; this presented a way of moving to a more focused and selective coding (Stottok, Bergaus & Gorra (2011); Charmaz, 2006) as similar themes were grouped together using different colours (See Appendix 4 for a sample of the colour coding undertaken).

The process was time consuming as I repeatedly went over previously coded themes to confirm and identify key linkages with more meaningful categories and their relationships to each other as advised by Stottok et al., (2011). This was done for all participants individually before collating them for the group. I also took notes during this process to help clarify my ideas and thoughts about how the codes were assigned. During this stage several thematic codes (for example, aspirations, agency, social relations) were generated using concepts largely drawn from the CA. This were later tested, refined and categorized further into themes and checked against the research questions and the CA. This led to the five capabilities identified and presented in chapter 7.

5.7 Data storage

The audio recordings provided one way of data storage. After listening to the recordings, I downloaded and stored them in a file in a password protected Open University (OU) memory stick. I assigned each of the files a code for easier retrieval later. Transcribed interviews were also stored in the same way. The field notes and other filed hard copy documents provided for additional storage. I locked these in a locker and kept the key with
me throughout the field work and later secured them with the University’s system upon returning from the field.

5.8 Rigour, trustworthiness and transferability

The subjective nature of a qualitative research like this one is bound to raise issues not only because of the influence that the researcher has in the research process but also because of the type of data gathered from participants (Bryman, 2008; Hammersley, 2000). To mitigate issues on rigour, this research integrated multiple methods, worked with diverse group of youth and used multiple data to ensure credibility and trustworthiness. This provided a way of cross-checking and reinforcing findings and patterns by comparing data from the different sources mentioned. This was an iterative process that took place throughout the research and not a ‘one off’ activity (Hammersley, 2000). Besides these checks with the various methods, I also went back to the field to seek for clarifications and confirmation of the data with individual youth. This provided a clear understanding of YWD lived experiences of social media use. Qualitative researchers observe that going back for feedback with participants is an important means of ensuring trustworthiness (Hammersley, 2000; Merriam, 1998).

Moreover, throughout this study I have been reflexive and transparent about my position in the research process, including the decisions taken at various stages and the justifications for the same. During the research, I took time to reflect about the various methods used and the information gathered from the participants. I was also open to consult with knowledgeable others including my supervisors and peers both individually and in academic forums. In line with phenomenological research, I have also used verbatim quotations from participants’ data as evidence to support the story that I have presented in this thesis (Moustakas, 1994). These measures, together with the documents and extensive field notes kept, further add to the trustworthiness of the study (Bryman, 2008; Hammersley, 2000).

Finally, like other qualitative studies, this study cannot claim that the findings are generalisable. It was not the intention of the study to generalise but, rather, to gain insight and understanding of the lived experiences of a small group of YWD experiences of social media in University settings in Kenya. While these findings are specific to the Kenyan context, each of the stories shared has produced a single piece of evidence that can be used to seek general patterns among studies of the same issues elsewhere.
5.9 Researcher Positionality

As a researcher, acknowledging my own role within the research is important. As highlighted in chapter 1, section 1.2, this research is born out of my particular experiences of working with YWD in the Kenyan context as well as my own beliefs and values. Furthermore, within this study, I have played an active role in formulating the research aims and questions, gathering data, analyzing and reporting the findings. All these have influenced the research process in the sense that, I am an insider in this research (Hammersley, 2000). Because of my professional knowledge of educational provision for YWD in Kenya, it was easy for me to create rapport and gain acceptance with the youth, to the extent that, when three of them (Neema, Muthee and Petero) went back home because of the prolonged lecturers’ strike mentioned above, they allowed me to make follow-up visits with them. Getting public transport to their home areas (Table 5.3) was not easy and the road network was poor. Some of these areas were very remote and finding accommodation was problematic. Even when a room became available - in most cases 5 to 8 miles away - basic facilities such as toilet and clean water supply were not readily available. Nonetheless, I treasured every visit because I sensed that by allowing me into their home areas, despite the observable challenges, the youth viewed me more as a friend than an interloper (Morrison, 2009).

Being in these physical spaces gave me a further glimpse into the realities of these youth’s everyday experiences at home, beyond what they had shared with me in the University. This broadened my insights into why they value their activities on social media in the way they do (see chapter 7 & 8). Whilst I also acknowledge that I cannot fully claim status as an insider amongst YWD (see pg. 71), the insider effect (Morrison (2009) (emphasis mine) has motivated me to find ways to make the research beneficial to the youth that I worked with. Within this view, being able to represent YWD voice effectively is both “ethically compelling and methodologically challenging” (Bailey, 2009, p.102). By writing this thesis, I become involved in “making up people” (Hacking, 1986, p.222) according to the data available to me. Practically, representing these youth without bias is not possible.

Although I have tried to minimise bias, I also acknowledge that the findings of this thesis represent my own interpretation of the data. The endeavour of self-reflexivity was therefore critical throughout the research process. Besides acknowledging my position, documenting my observations and experiences as well as being transparent to the reader about my objectives in every step of the study has been useful and is an integral part of
study. Such ethical commitments and accountability are essential in disability research as recommended by Barnes (2005). Being reflexive has also proved necessary in this study as it allowed me to begin questioning the methods used as well as the information given by the participants in relation to other data. In the same way, I have challenged my usual views about marginalised YWD, and their activities on social media in general. This has provided an opportunity for new ways of thinking and helped in the credibility and trustworthiness of the research (Hammersley, 2000; Patton, 2002).

Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted the issue of power relations, which is critical in research such as this - that involved YWD who are often overlooked and excluded in most aspects of their lives in Kenya, as illustrated in chapter 2. Ongoing reflection on the power relations that would arise between me and the participants in this research was one of the key reasons for setting this out as a participatory research with YWD. It justifies my decision to work with volunteers instead of going through university gatekeepers who would have easily ‘recommended’ the ‘right’ participants for the research as experienced previously (Gathoni, 2014). Contacting the youth directly without going through their seniors was an important way of affirming their position and place in the research. On their part, being able to volunteer willingly was a way of exercising their agency. Allowing the participants to take an active role in the research process as highlighted above, as well as my ongoing communications with them has also helped minimise power barriers between us. Overall, being aware of my positionality and continually trying to be sensitive in my interactions with each of the seven youth was fundamental throughout the research process and has allowed for their voice to be heard as envisioned from the onset of the research.

5.10 Ethical considerations

Whilst ethical concern is essential for any research with human participants, the need for additional care and ethical measures in research like this that worked with YWD who are considered vulnerable is extremely crucial. Ethical approval for this study was sought and given through the Open University (Appendix 1). As highlighted in section 5.4.1, I also obtained written permission from NACOSTI to undertake the research in Kenya (Appendix 2).
Informed consent (Appendix 3) was also sought with individual youth at the beginning of the study and throughout the study. Consent forms and information sheets about the research were presented to them in accessible formats (normal and large prints, contrasting colours and braille) depending on the individual youth. All information was shared using plain language and avoiding any technical jargon. To ensure that this was not just a mechanical exercise that needed to be done, I spent time with individual youth talking about the research and allowed them to ask questions and clarifications. From the onset, I was open and honest with the participants about the aims of the research. All participants retained a copy of the consent form for their records. The youth were also reminded that their participation was voluntary, anonymous and confidential. To protect their identity, pseudonyms have been used while reporting the data. Care has also been taken to ensure that all the photos that participants shared with me have no identifiable information; where necessary these have been blurred.

Besides the informed consents, because experiences of exclusion and marginalisations can be difficult to narrate especially for YWD (Stone & Priestley, 1996), care was taken to avoid undue distress during the various sessions held with each of them. I ensured that whatever individual youth shared with me with regards to impairment or disability was done freely and on their own terms. Where sensitive issues were raised by the youth, these were privileged and appreciated. In line with reimbursement models of ethical remunerative practice (Permutch-Wey & Borenstein, 2009) participants were each provided £10 mobile data gift vouchers to ensure that they did not incur financial costs for participating in the research, particularly with regards to going online where free Wi-Fi is not available. An additional £10 was also given to three participants (Neema, Muthee and Petero) when it became apparent that the cost of going online using internet bundles was expensive, especially when they were away from Nairobi during the strike period. Throughout the research process I have ensured that communication lines between me and the youth have remained open. I continue to engage with some of them on various issues mostly through WhatsApp and email.

5.11 Challenges and learning points

As highlighted above, there were many logistical challenges in implementing the research. Chiefly, the lecturers’ strike had a big effect on the research, including issues of financial resources for the participants, which played a key role in determining movement, outside of Nairobi, where I was based. Consequently, even though I wanted to do further follow-
ups with Neema, Muthee and Petero, this was limited. This was especially the case during the self-directed photography activity. Unlike the other four, where three to four follow-ups were made after I had taken time to listen and analyse the data gathered, making a third or fourth trip to see the three of them, was not possible. Whilst I still managed to gather rich insights data from the photographs they shared with me, I felt that more would have been better.

Although this research sought to work with volunteers, working with YWD from the three main groups of YWD (visual, physical and hearing impairments) represented in HE would have been desirable since I was keen on representing all voices of YWD. Whilst I managed to get one volunteer with hearing impairment, he is one of those who was dropped after I failed to reach their mobile numbers. Despite my busy schedule, looking back, if I had spared time to consult my networks of PWD, it may have been possible to locate him as he was enthusiastic about taking part in the study when I met him the first time. Though the data from the seven YWD who have shared their experiences is rich and in-depth, having his voice would have provided additional rare data to this research - of all YWD who are currently represented in HE in Kenya, those with hearing impairments are the most likely to miss out on research in HE (Opini, 2012).

5.12 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have detailed the methodological design developed for this study. Because of a lack of previous research in this area within the context of Kenya, there were few models to follow. This necessitated devising an innovative participatory approach which placed the voices of participants central to the research process and was adequately flexible to allow all the participants to contribute in ways which they found accessible for them. In line with the CA, this approach recognized the diversity and complexity of the participants’ lives and respected them as individuals with agency to articulate their views and not merely subjects to generate data from. The specific methods used to collect data engaged their interest, suited their needs and provided space for them to say and discuss what was important to them. This is central to the CA. I responded to the challenges in the context by reaching out to the participants in different locations and, whilst resource intensive, this helped develop commitment and trust with the participants and hopefully added value to their lives. Combined, these factors have made it possible to capture significant nuances of YWD experiences that are not common in most of the available
research in this area. In the next chapter a detailed description of the seven YWD who participated in the study is provided.
Chapter 6: Youth with disabilities’ participation on social media: Individual perspectives

6.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the seven student participants who took part in the study. It gives a profile of each YWD, showing the personal and contextual factors that influence their social media usage. In doing so I report findings that answer the first research question: What are the lived experiences of social media use by youth with disabilities in higher education in Kenya? To understand these experiences, the chapter draws on life history interviews, participant profiles, social media maps, field notes and participants’ social media diaries. Findings from this chapter lay an important foundation for the analysis that follows in chapters 7 and 8.

The chapter is divided into three main sections. The first section explores the individual lives of each of the seven YWD showing their educational journey. This is followed by a discussion on their individual lived experiences of social media usage in HE and highlights their specific activities on social media and why they value them. This is presented under different themes according to individual data. Finally, I conclude the chapter.

6.2 YWD’ individual lives and lived experiences of social media use in HE

In this section, I discuss each of the seven participants separately to underscore their different profiles as YWD and individual experiences of social media usage. To ensure that I capture all the common factors that enable/ hinder their activities on social media in their specific universities, I discuss participants from each institution together (following one another). Table 6.1 gives an overview of participants’ main activities on social media.
### Table 6.1 Overview of participants’ activities on social media.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>University</th>
<th>Main activities of social media usage</th>
<th>Device used</th>
<th>Social media platforms used</th>
<th>Access during holiday</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>- Academic use</td>
<td>Mobile phone &amp; Laptop</td>
<td>WhatsApp, Facebook, Skype, Instagram</td>
<td>Intermittent</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Information on personal development &amp; aspirations</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Participation in Social activities</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Advocacy/voice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Muthee</td>
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#### 6.2.1 Ben’s background and educational journey

Ben is a 22-year-old second year law student in University A. He is the second born in a close-knit family of three, with one sister and one brother all of whom are also undergraduate students in different universities in Kenya. His father is a shop-assistant in
Nairobi while his mother is a small-scale vegetable vendor at their local market at home in Siaya County\textsuperscript{15}, about ten hours’ journey away from Nairobi by bus. However, there is no direct bus to his home area, so he has four bus changes along the way. This is hard especially because the buses are not disability friendly: moreover, to make these changes successfully, one has to rely on the goodwill of other passengers. Ben identifies himself as a person with visual impairment (blind) not disability. He feels this distinction is crucial especially because of the way disability is viewed in society. Ben lost his sight at the age of nine years, while in class three, following a meningitis attack that devastated the whole family. The loss of sight had a significant impact on the family’s resources and Ben’s education. The father had to relocate to the city to look for a job since a big portion of the family land which they depended on had been sold to facilitate Ben’s treatment.

With visual impairment, the expectation would have been for Ben to be placed in a boarding special school as is common for many students with disabilities in Kenya (see chapter 2). Instead, after visiting a few of these schools, the family felt they could better support him from home and chose to retain him in his local primary school together with his siblings and childhood friends: Ben thus became the first blind student to be included in the school. This came with challenges for him as the school had neither the necessary learning resources nor trained teachers to provide for his educational needs. But the school administration and the teachers were willing to support him, and his fellow students were friendly; he enjoyed being there.

Ben scored highly in his end of primary school KCPE, gaining admission to one of his dream schools - a prestigious national secondary school for boys who do exceptionally well in the exam. Since the school was integrated (admitted blind students), he expected minimal barriers to his settling in, but this was not the case as he later realised:

The deputy principal and some teachers were not supportive...this deputy refused to respond to our issues when we raised them. You raise it today, you think they will do something tomorrow, the day after, nothing...Things were just difficult for us...we were concerned about very pertinent issues; books, braille machines, time-table, you know, academic issues...things that affected our performance. (Ben, LHI, 2017)

\textsuperscript{15} For an overview of each participant’s home area, see the map of Kenya in Appendix 5

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He only stayed on because his class teacher was very supportive of him and he was determined to succeed. Many of his classmates also helped as readers. They spent most of their evenings and weekends reading for him as he typed on his brailler. The sessions also served as study times and helped strengthen their friendships, which he says are still strong to this day.

Ben has always wanted to be a lawyer, so he worked hard aiming for the required (A) grade in KCSE for admission into a law degree course. However, getting the A grade and the placement to study law was not as straightforward as he had imagined. When the KCSE results were released\(^{16}\), his name did not feature amongst those who had scored grade A. His initial grade was a B+ which meant that he could not study law at University. However, on reflection, Ben felt that his grade was not a true representation of his hard work. Thus, with the help of his family and class teacher, he appealed to the KNEC for a re-mark. It was not an easy process and the fee required was exorbitant, forcing his father to take a loan. Ben was relieved when he received the revised mark, a grade A- (minus).

Although this was still lower than his anticipated A grade, he was admitted to study law through *affirmative action* as provided for in Article 55 of the Constitution of Kenya 2010 (see chapter 2). He believes that, as a trained lawyer, he will have a good chance in adult life and have resources to overcome the many barriers facing PWD in Kenya. He wants to specialise in human rights law and hopes to use his knowledge and skills as a lawyer to fight for the rights of PWD in the country. Ben resides in the student halls in the law-only campus, where he shares a room with his best friend Muthee, fellow student with visual (low vision) impairments. They met during registration in the first year and have since formed a strong bond. Ben and Muthee are among the few (eight) students with disabilities out of the approximately one thousand five hundred undergraduates studying law in this University\(^{17}\). Their other colleague with visual impairments was a senior in third year at the time of the interview; the other five have mobility related impairments. The eight of them relate very well and fondly refer to each other as ‘Wakili’ [lawyer].

Traditionally, only senior students are accommodated in this campus because space is limited. But the University has planned for all students with disabilities studying law to be accommodated in the campus. This is helpful because all law-related facilities, activities,

\(^{16}\) KCSE results are usually announced on national TV by the Cabinet Secretary of education in Kenya and the names of all students who score straight A’s are made public.

\(^{17}\) Personal communication with Ben and his peers with disabilities during a disability workshop that I attended with them during the scoping study in 2016.
and classes are held within the campus. Although Ben would have wanted to ‘enjoy’ life with other freshmen in the main campus accommodation - about thirty minutes away by bus - he appreciates the current arrangement because getting around the inaccessible city is not easy for him and the bus system is unreliable.

The University officially communicates through email and notice boards. Lecturers use emails for class announcements; they can also send texts to class representatives when information is urgent. Although the University provides personal laptops to all students with visual impairments, they have to source their own screen-readers or any other assistive technology (AT) that they might require. This was extremely expensive for Ben and he stayed without it for a long time until he joined a WhatsApp group with other students with visual impairments where he learned how to access the software without incurring any expense. Despite the provisions by the University as shown above, Ben reported that sometimes lecturers ‘forget’ to include him in some parts of their lessons:

Like when they use PowerPoints to explain a point and keep referring to it forgetting I am in class… another one forgot to bring the soft copy exam to class. (Ben, LHI, 2017)

Although the University has not provided all the support he needs to be able to participate fully as he would wish to, Ben mentioned that this was the first time a learning institution seemed prepared for him; he felt a sense of belonging. Ben is a member of the larger University students association. He and other students with disabilities in the University are also self-organised into groups and often visit schools to sensitize students about their rights, particularly disability rights. He also belongs to several DPOs. At the time of interviewing, he was actively involved in the registration of a professional network for PWD in the country through which they hope to push the disability agenda with the government and other employers:

During our meetings at the Union for the blind, guys noted that employment is one of the biggest challenge for us…even guys who have University qualifications are struggling to get a job even with the government…That is why members felt we should start engaging…yah it is provided in the constitution…I volunteered to be in the team because I understand law and I told you I have registered my own company, so I know what is required. (Ben, LHI, 2017)
Ben’s participation on social media

Ben started using social media when he joined University, but he knew about it earlier through his sister while he was still in secondary school. He was always fascinated as his sister described the many things she could do through social media. However, his parents could not afford an accessible phone at the time. It was not until he joined University that his father managed to buy him his current phone. The first thing he did was join Facebook and WhatsApp, the two platforms he knew most about. The beginning was not easy for him because the assistive technology (AT) he was using on his phone was unreliable but with help from a senior colleague with visual impairments, he was able to overcome the barrier. This new-found friend also advised him to join their WhatsApp group where he has learned various ‘survival’ tips such as how to access specialised AT without having to pay for it.

Ben is a keen user of social media especially at the University because of the freely available Wi-Fi which enables him to go online without worrying about the cost of connection. Besides Facebook and WhatsApp, he also uses Skype and Instagram. However, he prefers WhatsApp because it is reliable and more compatible with Talkback – the AT that he uses to access his phone. Ben reports that WhatsApp is also more popular with most of his friends: “Yes, all my friends…everybody I know is on WhatsApp, and I wanted a platform through which I would easily reach these people.” (Ben, SMM, 2017)

Ben’s use of social media as a student

Ben uses Facebook to gets ideas for his class assignments. Law students are often asked to simulate real-life cases. Ben found such examples on Facebook forums. Ben and his friends at campus also used WhatsApp for class discussions. He found it easy to participate in these discussions through WhatsApp because most of his classmates lived in the main campus, where they mostly held such meetings in the evenings. Ben did not live on this campus but he managed to give his contributions to such discussions through WhatsApp:

The chairperson of the group is able to organise to have members who don’t live there to give their input through WhatsApp. So, during the meeting I can
make a WhatsApp call with them or if not, I just send my contributions to the group. (Ben, LHI, 2017)

Thus, through the use of WhatsApp, Ben was able to participate in such class discussions together with his peers despite being away from them physically. Whilst this strategy is mainly targeted at Ben and other students with disabilities who are accommodated separately, in reality, it also benefits non-disabled peers who do not reside in University accommodation. At the time of interviewing, Ben was leading the commercial law group. He thought that volunteering was a good way of learning leadership skills at campus. Moreover, it was easy for him because of WhatsApp:

You know because of WhatsApp it is possible for me to coordinate discussions even if I am not there physically. You know, as a group leader I provide leadership yah…like I might WhatsApp a few people to do one part of the question…I send communication about when we shall meet…I keep them updated, such things yah. (Ben, SMM, 2017)

Besides the activities related to his being a student as shown above, Ben used Facebook and WhatsApp to sensitize his peers with disabilities on the need to take part in all University activities. He felt that this not only gave him a voice to speak his mind but also influence decision making amongst his peers:

I wrote one powerful article on the campaigns and why we should participate. I shared it on our WhatsApp group with my fellow YWD…People read and liked the article…but basically some were in support of my view while others were opposed to it. Which was good because it shows that they had taken time to read. (Ben, SMM, 2017)

In addition, Ben and his colleagues with disabilities used Facebook for advocacy on disability issues within the University as a group. In this way, Ben felt that Facebook had given them a common voice to speak as a group:

Like here at campus comrades have a Facebook group…that is a big audience like all (name of University) students are free to join…we use Facebook to sensitize other students on issues of disability…either our representative or he assigns one of us to post (Ben, LHI, 2017).
Related to this was the issue of affirmative action. Ben belonged to a network of other PWD and had Skype meetings frequently to sensitise and support one another on their rights and how to demand for these rights:

Issues to do with affirmative action like the 5 percent rule such…okay we have been talking a lot through Skype…yes on the group. If you know you share, these are the kind of conversations we’ve been having…it is based on this affirmative action, the issues of Persons with disabilities and the organisations I was telling you about. (Ben, SMM, 2017)

**Ben’s use of social media as a community member**

A big portion of Ben’s activities on Facebook and WhatsApp were social, with family, friends in the University and at church. As a family they had a WhatsApp group for ‘engaging together’. This WhatsApp group provided Ben with an easy way to keep in touch with the other family members despite their distance. Moreover, using WhatsApp to communicate back home was cheaper for him since, ‘making phone calls has additional costs’, which he could not afford often. Communicating with his family was important for him as he integrated into University life away from them:

We have a family WhatsApp group and that is where we engage. The frequent participants are my siblings and cousins, the guys I was talking about…as a family we engage, this helps me to keep in touch…, we talk, we joke, we share a lot… Also, I rely on the group to provide my parents with information like information on things I need, to sustain myself here in the University …eehh…Yes such (Ben, LHI, 2017)

Besides family, Ben had friends with whom he was closely networked: most were spread across different parts of Kenya, but a few were abroad. Some of these were ‘casual friends’, like course mates who he had recently met in campus. Others, ‘my old close friends’ were mostly former classmates who were also students in various universities across the country. Facebook and WhatsApp helped them remain connected: “When you keep in touch… the chats, the pictures…there is that closeness…a strong bond that couldn’t have existed (Ben, SMM, 2017).” For him, ‘such level of closeness’ with other people besides his immediate family would not have been possible without WhatsApp and Facebook. Ben also thought it was ‘just fun’ to be able to chat with friends on these platforms.
Ben’s use of social media for looking forward towards the future

Ben and some of his friends were organised in different WhatsApp groups mostly set up because of their shared interests. One of the WhatsApp groups that he and his peers with visual impairments had at campus was for information sharing purposes. He said that members shared ‘very useful information’ with one another in the forum. It is from this group that Ben learned how to ‘crack’ a software for use with his laptop:

That is why I told you that these groups are mostly for information…very useful information…that is where I learned to crack …(name of the software). For heaven’s sake it is very expensive, I personally can’t afford it…It is 120,000 shillings [about £900]. But someone just shared it in the group…this is where I found the information. (Ben, LHI, 2017)

From another such group on Facebook Ben got information on how to register a company. He had recently registered one and hoped to use it to apply for government tenders:

The information was shared to us through social media actually, on our Facebook group…A colleague of ours here who is blind has already benefitted from such tenders…And he is living his life very well. (Ben, SMM, 2017)

Ben’s social media diary showed that he spends much of his time in the above forums looking for resources - for example, information on how to improve himself. As noted earlier, Ben had recently registered a limited company through which he wanted to apply for government tenders to supply stationery. He had learned about the idea from a Facebook group and hopes that once he starts getting income from this project, he will stop relying on ‘others’:

If I am able to make an extra coin from not relying on others…you know like from my father…that is money from outside. You get me. Your life is in the hands of somebody. I want independence in how to use my money. That is life. You know with this pocket money you really have to deny yourself a lot…the simple basics only. (Ben, PA, 2017)
Besides, the extra income is not just for him to ‘live very well.’ As a first-born son he feels it is time to start supporting his parents who have sacrificed a lot to ensure that he and his siblings succeed in life. He also liked farming, which he noted was a good source of fresh food and income. He said that Facebook was a good resource of on how to practise being a farmer:

I keep chicken and rabbits and also have a greenhouse back at home. And Facebook has helped me know how to be a successful farmer. There is so much information on how to do such things on Facebook that has really helped me. …Like chicken especially chicks, I didn’t know until I read on Facebook…you need to shelter them in a round brooder not the ones we use kienyeji (locally). You read, and you get to know. (Ben, PA, 2017)

Facebook and WhatsApp helped Ben make connections that are of benefit to him and the platforms have helped him to maintain them:

There is this part of connection, I am a student yah…you need to create connections that will be of benefit to you…like further education opportunities that are there for me after I finish this first degree, so Facebook and WhatsApp is helpful in that way. (Ben, SMM, 2017)

Related to this was the issue of mentorship which Ben was receiving because of a linkage with friends at the Union for the Blind. They did this through Skype calls and WhatsApp chats:

Like me and Samuel being my mentor, we’ve had several talks about life, and I think they’ve helped me a lot because this is a person who has had great experience in life with visual impairment, so he is able to counsel me or advise me on how to go about any matter. And also, how to go about a challenge which may bring difficulty…I can consult such people because they are resourceful. And were it not for the social media platforms we have … assuming we had no Skype no WhatsApp… that would not be easy. (Ben, PA, 2017)

During the field work, they mostly communicated through Skype because Samuel was abroad for his studies. Their conversations were long and often held over the weekends
when both of them had enough time. They have since moved their conversations to WhatsApp because Samuel is now back in Kenya.

6.2.2 Muthee’s background and educational journey

Muthee is 22 years old and the first born of three boys. His ‘loving and strong mother’ is the sole provider for the family. The mother presently works as a teacher-aid for students with special needs in a regular school a few miles away from their current home in Nyeri, which is about four hours’ journey by bus from Nairobi. She also has a small kiosk near their home where she works in the evenings and weekends to supplement her salary. Muthee said that his uncles had previously supported them during his early years as his mother moved around looking for employment/income for the family. His second born brother is in his final year in primary school and Muthee assists him with his studies whenever he is at home. Muthee hopes that the brother will follow in his example by working hard and join University too.

His last-born brother is 10 years old and still in lower primary school due to a learning disability (Down Syndrome) and, “you know also, there is no school that can provide for his learning needs near our home (Muthee, LHI, 2017)”. Muthee said that this is the reason why his mother agreed to take her current job although it does not pay well. The job was advertised by the newly formed County government and although she did not have any training or skills, she felt that she could learn on the job. She hopes to use her new skills to help support her son better even when he is at home. That is why the County government gave her the job. Muthee observed that life had been challenging for them as a family. However, since joining campus Muthee felt that the situation had improved slightly because he “sometimes helps lighten the burden” (Muthee, LHI, 2017) by sharing his pocket money which he gets through the support of an NGO that pays for his University education. In so doing, Muthee feels he is taking up responsibility as a first-born son:

You know, as a first born, I have a responsibility to care for them…It is automatic. That’s how it is supposed to be in our place. You know, after my mother it is me. So, I am concerned about their well-being. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

Muthee is in his second year at a law school in University A, together with his best friend Ben above. The two share a room in the halls of residence at the campus. Muthee has a visual disability which he describes as low vision. He studied in various regular primary
schools because the family kept moving. Though he loved school, it was difficult for him whenever he joined a new school. Teachers thought that he was being lazy because he did not like writing mainly because he could not see the board properly and whenever he wrote anything, he could not write in a straight line. Muthee said that his condition was not easily understood by people including his teachers:

There are others who were not really convinced about my visual problem, so they thought that I was refusing to write. Such were not kind to me…You see I don’t wear glasses and I don’t use a white cane like (...) and you know people are used to such. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

Despite not being able to see the blackboard clearly, Muthee said that he had very good memory; this is what he relied on in addition to reading text books. The only time he wrote, albeit very slowly, was during exams; even with extra time, he never finished any given exam. Notwithstanding, he was smart and always topped his class:

My mother has kept a file of all my exam results from class six to secondary school…it is good memories… But whenever we did an exam, they saw that I was excelling so they started liking me. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

After his KCPE Muthee was admitted to a high performing provincial boarding secondary school for boys in Northern Kenya. The school was extremely far from his home (about 4 days’ journey by truck) in one of the driest parts of the country, mostly occupied by pastoralist communities. The area has very poor road network and so Muthee often remained at the school for a whole year for a lack of transport back home for holidays. Although this was not uncommon for many students from that part of the country, Muthee said it was a difficult experience for him because he had never been away from his family for that long.

Muthee scored an A- (Minus) in his KCSE but says that he could have scored a straight A had the KNEC not ‘messed’ him up: “I didn’t know but during the exams, that is when I learned that the Principal had recommended to the KNEC that I needed large prints”. (Muthee, LHI, 2017). KNEC went ahead and provided the accommodations without assessing him. However, Muthee says that this worked against him as the exam papers became blurry making it even harder for him to read and keep time. In addition, the KNEC forgot to adapt the questions and answers in relation to the large prints. In Maths, for example, he had problems tackling geometry questions because, despite the enlarged
shapes and figures, the multiple-choice answers given did not correspond with the former. He almost missed his KCSE for what he terms as a ‘very difficult situation at home’ for almost a year leading to the exams period. But he is thankful for his fourth form teachers who contributed their money and paid his fees and pocket money for the year thus ensuring he was not distracted from studies. He says he did not disappoint them:

And you know they are really proud of me. You know I was the first student from that school to get an A- and to join law school…. I am the only one so far. They are proud of me. And you know that school, it is (…), somewhere in those sides, *huko mwisho wa Kenya*. [the end of Kenya - an expression that is normally used in the country to indicate a neglected place/ area]. (Muthee, SMM, 2017)

His teachers also fundraised for his fees and upkeep for the first year at the University and later helped connect him to a Catholic NGO which currently sponsors his education. Muthee is happy that his mother does not have to worry about his fees now.

**Muthee’s participation in social media**

Muthee has been using Facebook for the last four years. He learned about it from a friend in secondary school but he did not have a phone at school, so he waited until he went home and borrowed his mother’s phone which she then used to register and join. He said that he used his left-over pocket money to buy bundles to connect to be able to go online. Since then, he has also joined WhatsApp, YouTube, Skype & Instagram. He is more active on WhatsApp and Facebook although WhatsApp is his favourite because his close friends and cousins use it and: “It is more accessible for me. Yah…Also, it doesn’t have many formalities and it is not as heavy as FB. And you know it is easy to use it. It is easier than FB”. (Muthee, SMM, 2017). In campus, WhatsApp is more popular with his classmates both for social and academic chats. He uses social media in different ways at the University. On average he spends three hours daily on social media mostly after his classes. He said, he was: ‘a man of few words’.

**Muthee’s use of social media as a student**

Muthee uses Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp as supplementary resources to get information for his studies at campus. However, for him, the availability of these resources in various formats is particularly helpful because of the nature of his condition:
As a lawyer, the wider and varied knowledge you have the better…now with these social media I have a variety of choice to tap from…You know, also because of my condition I don’t write well and I don’t like it… I am good at listening so when I hear something from YouTube it helps me in understanding the stuff in books better. (Muthee, SMD, 2017)

According to him, YouTube has helpful videos on different topics which are ‘eye-opening’ for him as a law student:

So, let’s talk about learning, people sometimes post interviews on YouTube. Like you know, JKL, The Jeff Koinange Live. Those interviews that he holds on TV and then they post them on YouTube…those interviews are very informative because he invites respected people in different fields, like respected lawyers. So, if you listen to those interviews, you become enlightened. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

Also, it adds to my learning. I am an upcoming lawyer, I get to see how they are arguing in those debates that’s important for me, just watching them…even Jeff’s personality, the way he moderates the debates with calmness and sometimes even throwing jabs at the participants. Those are great skills to have. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

The need to be updated on current affairs is significant for Muthee. As a trainee lawyer, he says that he needs to be informed about daily happenings because sometimes lecturers give assignments from any such topics:

Like right now just listening to siasa ya nchi kwa FB [the country’s politics on Facebook], you get to learn about what people are thinking, whether our country has the right leadership and what can be done… And you know most of our exams now are full of these politics stuff…also did you hear that our governor died? Now such things, for example, what the law says…yah. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

In using these media for current affairs, Muthee says he is aware that some people’s postings especially those of politicians are often not necessarily true:

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18 This is a popular live TV show on contemporary issues in the country.
Sometimes I just wonder how these politicians reason...and they post such lies on social media... like do they think all of us are their fools? I hope nobody is taking them seriously (Muthee, LHI, 2017).

For Muthee and his classmates, WhatsApp groups are common for exchanging notes on any given assignments and for class updates. He also thinks that Facebook is a good platform for making his thoughts known without fear of restrictions:

You see, on my timeline, I can write what I am thinking and that gives me joy knowing I have a place where I can get my thoughts out. FB is an important platform for me to talk about issues that are of interest to me without being limited by anyone. Yah... and you know my friends are able to see it and they can comment then we can reason out together (Muthee, SMM, 2017).

Muthee’s use of social media as a community member

He is well connected to a network of ‘current’ and ‘old’ friends. With the majority of these friends, Muthee uses WhatsApp to stay in touch either individually or in groups. Their chats vary depending on the type of friendship and the reasons for the chats. With his current friends at campus, “we mostly chat on WhatsApp...sometimes you don’t want to go to their rooms but just need a chat just like that yah.” (Muthee, SMM, 2017).

Often with these friends, the chats are not solely social. At times he initiates a social chat and, in the process, they end up talking about assignments:

You just find yourself talking about a given assignment, asking for example how to approach it... so you see this was just a social chat but because you know these are friends we share classes with, so we just discuss. (Muthee, SMM, 2017)

Muthee also uses WhatsApp with other close friends mostly his former schoolmates who are now studying in different universities in the country and others who did not make it to the University but are now involved in different activities to earn a living. His chats with those in other universities involve ‘exchanging views about universities’. At times they chat for long hours discussing their choice of courses jokingly: “Like these IT guys, like
those in JKUAT\textsuperscript{19}, they like selling me their business ideas (laughing) and I tell them I will charge them for my legal services” (Muthee, SMM, 2017). It is through these friends that he learns what is happening in other campuses. During the period in which the research interviews were conducted, lecturers were on strike and classes had been disrupted. Muthee notes that during this time he and his friends were updating one another on what was happening in their respective campuses.

He is a member of the Christian Union and they have a WhatsApp group where they regularly chat to encourage each other because he feels that as, young people, sometimes things are tough. He said that this was an important support group for him in campus where they:

Discuss how to approach things, or WhatsApp to arrange for meetings…like hanging out, we arrange how to do socials together, where to meet you know things like that… you know depending on the availability of friends, we go outside of campus we go out maybe in the city, in a hotel for drinks, or going out for retreats. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

Muthee has another layer of friends whom he refers to as his ‘home friends’; these are mostly neighbours from his home area or “guys I just hang out with” (Muthee, SMM, 2017). He notes that these are important friends because they often update him about his home area:

You see, when I am here, I need to keep updated about what is happening back home. So, these friends are the ones who keep me updated…they let me know what is happening generally around my home area…With WhatsApp it is easy to be informed (Muthee, SMM, 2017)

According to him, these friends are also very supportive in a different sense. As a first-born son, he says he always wants to know if his family is okay. He relies on these friends to follow through the happenings at home and know what actions to take when necessary: “You know, I don’t always have to communicate with my mother… she gets sick many times, but she hides it from me…but these friends keep me updated.” (Muthee, SMM, 2017). Besides being updated about his family situation, Muthee says that keeping in touch

\textsuperscript{19} Jomo Kenyatta University College of Agriculture and Technology is a public University that is popular for its IT courses in the country.
with these friends gives him a sense of belonging and continuity when he goes back home during the holidays:

Also, when I go for holidays, these are the people who I socialise with a lot you know… you don’t want to be a stranger every time you go back home…and with this WhatsApp you have no excuse (Muthee, SMM, 2017).

Overall, for Muthee, having the social chats with all the friends was good for ‘social bonding’ which he feels is important for his social development. His social media diary shows that he sometimes has long chats with some of these friends. In addition to using social media to be with friends, he loves listening to music for leisure and says that YouTube is a good source of his favourite songs:

You know, I even get an opportunity to enjoy some of my leisure activities there… like listening to music on YouTube which I really like. So, it is a way for me to enjoy things that I love. Music makes me relax. You know there is this saying, that all work without play makes Jack a dull boy… And you know on YouTube, you can get all different types of music for free and you see that is the other good thing. (Muthee, LHI, 2017).

Muthee’s social media use for looking forward towards the future

Muthee feels that social media was an important place to network and find helpful information that enabled him to prepare for life after University. He had received mentorship from different people including some practising lawyers in the city. He had met some of them offline first when they came to give talks at campus, while others were introduced to him through some of his networks on Facebook:

Like my current mentor, he is a lawyer here in Nairobi…He is from our home area, but I didn’t know. It is one of my former teachers from secondary school who connected me to him through FB…he said they studied with him. So, we just started chats it is just like we already knew each…and he is now helping me when I have things that I need to clarify… also he told me to inform him about the clinicals because he can help. (Muthee, LHI, 2017).
Outside of law, Muthee has other mentors, mostly his cousins and friends older than him who work in different sectors in the country. He says that he is the one who initiates most of the conversations with them as he wants to learn about life after University:

We keep in touch mostly through WhatsApp and FB…at least they give me a picture of their working environments, what they do and things like that. It helps me to know what I can expect when I am done with school…Even if they are not lawyers, there are these attitudes needed in a job. Those are important. Those general attitudes of helping you get and keep a job…And you know why I ask is because I want to prepare myself to the world of work. (Muthee, SMD, 2017)

Like his friend Ben, he is also in the process of registering an online business in readiness for “when I am out of here.” (Muthee, LHI, 2017). He says that because of the affirmative action which enables him and other PWD to place tenders with the government, he needed to give it a try. He hopes he will place tenders especially with his County government. He said that a friend from one of his WhatsApp groups with peers with disabilities at the University had sold the idea them and he was optimistic that:

Once the company is registered, am sure social media will be a very easy way to advertise about it. So that is another good thing about social media. I don’t need to pay advertising fee to a company to do it for me. I will just go on FB and let my friends know about it and ask them to like it and to tell their friends about it. (Muthee, LHI, 2017).

He also likes TED Talks on YouTube because he learns about how to develop business ideas. TED Talks are one of his favourite videos on YouTube: “I like watching and listening to the TED talks. I like the way people appear confident. Those talks are very inspirational.” (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

### 6.2.3 Rukia’s background and educational journey

Rukia (21) is an outgoing first year student of International relations (IR) and journalism at University B. She uses a wheelchair following a condition that paralysed her at an early age when she was just starting to walk. She is the last born of four children, but all her
siblings were adults by the time she was born. Her elderly parents live in one of the slums in Nairobi where the father works as a blacksmith and the mother a vegetable vendor.

Rukia says that growing up in the slums was not easy especially as a girl with a disability. Her family loved her but because of widespread insecurity in the area and her being in a wheelchair, her parents felt that they needed to take extra care when they went to work so she was often locked indoors. Although Rukia understood their concerns, she was unhappy because she missed out on opportunities to socialise with children of her age. To ‘forget about the problems’, Rukia immersed herself in books from an early age - a practice which she says has borne fruit now that she is in the University. She is proud of this achievement as she is the only one in the family with an education beyond primary school. She is confident that with this education, she now has a way out of the slums.

Rukia has studied in special schools, from nursery through to secondary school. Because of the nature of her disability, environment and a lack of availability of a good fit school, Rukia was placed in a nursery school attached to a boarding special school which she would later attend for her primary education. Being away from home from such an early age was not easy for her but with occasional visits from her parents and support from her kind-hearted teachers, Rukia was able to cope. She passed well and secured a scholarship from a bank that pays secondary education for top performers in the country. However, her choice of secondary school was turned down when she reported to the school, “The principal of (…) refused to admit me. She told us that the school did not provide for girls like me…she advised us to go to a special school.” (Rukia, LHI, 2017)

Disappointed and with no financial resources to seek redress through the courts, Rukia’s parents took her to a special secondary school. Though the school lacked many learning facilities and resources, Rukia noted that it was very supportive of all the students, so she worked hard and scored the minimum grade C+ required for University admission. But she failed to secure government funding (loan and bursary) and thus remained at home as her peers reported to college. Discouraged and not knowing where to turn to for help, she found encouragement from Facebook:

    I would just go to Facebook and see what pastor Natasha had posted, the different bible verses, like God says this…. I could just read and get inspired. Another person saying you know…just very uplifting verses. (Rukia, LHI, 2017).
While chatting on Facebook with a former colleague one day, Rukia learned about her current scholarship. It is a tuition only scholarship offered by the University to enable students with disabilities who would ordinarily not be able to pay for their studies at the University. Rukia was determined to get it so she applied and was accepted. With the help of an employee of an NGO which works within her home area, she also applied for another scholarship for her living expenses. This too was granted: the NGO offered to pay for her upkeep for the entire period of the degree thus making it possible for her to rent a room near her University where she currently lives.

She had wanted to live in University accommodation, but she said accommodation at the University was very expensive [about £500 a month], which was beyond her stipend, hence her decision to live in her current accommodation. Her ensuite room is in a well secured flat about half a mile away from the University. The room is on the ground floor and is easily accessible via a ramp. The accommodation has freely available Wi-Fi which enables Rukia to go online whenever she wants to. Compared to her home, Rukia jokes that this room feels like a ‘palace’. Only a few other students live in the property- none of whom has a disability. Many of her other neighbours are young professionals who work in the nearby offices. Most times Rukia pushes herself to the campus whenever she has classes or other activities to attend to. This is difficult especially on the potholed path leading to the University (see Figure 5.6.) But it does not discourage her. In fact, her determination has challenged some of her non-disabled colleagues:

> Like the other day, a guy was telling me…you know I normally see you going to class every day. You pass through my place. I look at you every day…. and the way many times I am bored and just want to sleep and do nothing. But these days, when I remember you, I just get up and go to class…you have challenged me. (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

Occasionally some of her few friends offer to help push her particularly during the rainy seasons when the path becomes impassable. As discussed earlier in the methodology section, this is one of the high cost private Universities in Kenya. The number of students with disabilities studying here is significantly low. According to Rukia at the time of my undertaking this research, there were only twelve students with disabilities known to her. Apart from three whom she was not very familiar with because, “they are normally dropped and picked up after classes, so I don’t know much about them…” (Rukia, LHI, 2017), all the other nine were on scholarships provided by the University and/ or NGOs.
The nine of them were closely knit together. Seven of them are alumni of the same special secondary school as Rukia; the remaining two had attended different schools. Rukia was the only one combining journalism and IR, the rest were doing different courses ranging from either IR, IT and counselling. When she joined, she wanted to study journalism which she says is her ‘favourite’ but:

I decided to combine it with IR… so if they deny me a job…you know like I was telling you, I have not seen any disabled person presenting news, I don’t know why…yah…so IR will help me in that way (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

The University is not easily accessible by wheelchair. She says that although there are lifts, they are not very reliable, they keep failing and there are no ramps. During our conversations, Rukia frequently said that she was not sure that the University had genuine interest for PWD:

But generally, this University has really not been interested in what happens to people with disabilities…I think they assume that a person with disability for example me on my wheelchair will just somehow cope… it is very wrong (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

With regards to social interactions with her non-disabled peers, Rukia feels that most of the ‘rich kids’ are not very welcoming. But it did not bother her much because her goal at the University was very clear:

It doesn’t bother me much, I am not in (…) to be accepted. That is not my main goal. I am here to get an education (laughing) not inclusion so, if someone doesn’t accept me, that is their problem, I can’t be bothered. (Rukia, PA, 2017).

Rukia is keen on her studies and other activities within and out of the University. At the University, she has volunteered in various capacities including planning for the disability day, which she also hosted as a master of ceremonies. She has appeared on two different TV stations and a radio show to share her experiences of living with disability. At the time of undertaking fieldwork, Rukia was the brand ambassador for ‘NikoEducable’ a campaign by an NGO to raise funds to support students with disabilities in the country. The campaigns were on regular and social media especially Facebook where she kept updating people about the progress and encouraging them to keep giving. As indicated in chapter 5,
the University did not have a disability policy but was in the process of drafting one. Rukia was one of two students appointed to the disability task-force to help in writing the policy, together with a team of senior members of the University administration and the legal team. She felt that the University was under pressure to get the policy:

I don’t know whether you have heard it but (…) is currently in court. It is in the news. It has been sued by a lady, a student here. I think she is lawyer and she is doing her master’s here…she wanted to access books in the School of Business…the lifts were not working and there are no ramps there… I think this is why the admin. is very keen on having this policy done immediately (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

As a member of the taskforce, she is happy and hopes that once the policy is established there will be some positive changes in the University, ‘I think, something good is going to come out of this taskforce.’ (Rukia, LHI, 2017)

Rukia’s participation on social media

Rukia has been using social media for four years now. She started with Facebook while still in secondary school with help from her friends. Although it was/is forbidden for students to have phones in schools in Kenya, some of her friends always managed to smuggle in a phone which they used to go online with over the weekends when there were no teachers to monitor them. She has since joined WhatsApp, Twitter, YouTube and Skype, in all of which she is actively engaged. Rukia is a passionate social media user particularly Facebook, WhatsApp and Twitter. On average she spends four hours daily on these three, all of which are linked together; Rukia said that she had linked them to ensure she did not miss out on anything that interests her. These three seemed like another ‘residence’ for Rukia as she traversed between them for study related materials and social chats with her big network of friends, role models and linkages spread across the world.

Rukia’s use of social media as a student

Rukia and one of her few friends at the University used WhatsApp significantly for their study activities. She noted that WhatsApp was a fast way of catching up on class assignments:
Especially when we are in session because we want to know how our work is going on. She can WhatsApp to find out how far I have gone with my assignments, I will also ask to know, then if we feel there is need to meet and help one another then we can decide when and just meet. Yah…that is how we normally do it (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

Even when the friend is not coming to campus, they will still follow up with their assignments via WhatsApp:

Like she takes a picture of her work and WhatsApp’s it to me and she is like, did you get the same answer? (laughing) then if I got the same answer namwambia [I tell her] yes, or if it is different I WhatsApp her mine. (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

Rukia also uses WhatsApp for class assignments with groups at the campus. In this University, groups are assigned by lecturers. After they are assigned, Rukia says that students find it more convenient to, ‘meet via WhatsApp because people live in different parts of the city.’ Members then post their contributions on a given assignments to the group and the group leader compiles them or assigns the responsibility to other members of the group. However, she noted that sometimes it was not easy to work in these groups:

Like this semester, I had nightmares with groups. It has been a very difficult time working with some people… I can’t even describe. Nobody was taking up anything. You know people are silent in the group even the group leader. We were given an assignment, nobody is saying anything, I have to prompt people. I keepWhatsApping them like “you know, you guys, we were given this assignment, and time is running out, what do we do?” Some will respond some will just keep quiet. They are just difficult people, these spoilt Nairobi kids… (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

She mentioned that should she find herself with such a group in future, she would leave it immediately, “I can assure you that I will protest to the lecturer. I will ask to be moved.” (Rukia, LHI, 2017). As a student of journalism and IR, Rukia thinks that Facebook and Twitter are useful sources of information generally and that her training requires her to be ‘up to date always’:
I am doing International relations and journalism, right? Like today I saw on FB that Trump is going to visit China yah…I read about it and what other people had commented. Then when I went to class, I just asked my course mates, did you see that Trump is going to China? What do you think? And we just exchanged our thoughts…So, I am up to date. (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

Facebook was also a good source of other information like important events in the world which she would usually not know about easily. Being aware of such events helps her participate in the University and other forums of her choice:

Also, the International Women’s Day….people on Facebook post what is happening on this day… such things. Like this year, they were awarding badges did you hear about it? “Africa for her” it was on a FB posting.’ So, I went to their page, I answered the questions they were asking, and they send me a badge.’ (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

As a member of the University disability task-force, Rukia finds Facebook and YouTube helpful in researching for relevant materials to guide her input:

Facebook and YouTube really helped me with some of the information that I have used to contribute to the task force… part of the research that I have been doing is on the net. Apart from Google, these two have really helped. (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

In this regard, the information she gets from the three platforms enables her to participate effectively in the two roles identified, as a student who needs to be conversant with current affairs and as a member of the University disability taskforce.

**Rukia’s use of social media as a community member**

Rukia mentioned that she has recently been involved in several advocacy campaigns to raise awareness on students with disabilities in the country and the need to support them raise fees for secondary and college education. As a beneficiary herself, Rukia feels that she needs to use all avenues to rally people to give: “Apart from radio and TV which are paid for, I use FB a lot because it is free, I keep posting updates and urging people to contribute.” (Rukia, LHI, 2017) Through Facebook Rukia she is able to participate in advocacy activities in her home area despite not being there in person:
One of my friends is a social worker in our home area, so she posts about the activities she is engaging in. That is how I know... Like last semester, there was a big campaign she had put on Facebook. It was a case about a disabled girl who had been raped by a policeman...She put it on Facebook and called for justice for the girl. So, I also joined in the campaign from here. (Rukia, SMM, 2017).

She mentioned that such cases are common in the slums, but they often go unreported by traditional media. Socially, Rukia uses Facebook and WhatsApp daily, ‘to keep in touch’ with her big network of old friends mostly former classmates and friends from the ‘Wings to Fly scholarship’ which she benefitted from while studying in secondary school. A big proportion of her time online is spent with these friends because:

Friends are important, no man is an island all of us want friends to share our lives with. You know...like the class of 2015 we are very tight...So when we start chatting, wah...we just chat, and chat and you know some of them are as far as Malindi but with WhatsApp or FB, it just feels like you are in the room together. (Rukia, SMM, 2017).

According to Rukia these friends give her emotional support, “when I am down, sometimes I just go online, and I know that my former classmate, so and so can help listen to all my nonsense and I reach out just like that.” (Rukia, SMM, 2017). Her network of friends is growing and although there not many in her University, she chats with some ‘course mates and friends’, some of whom are non-Kenyan citizens:

Like the friend I was telling you is from Zimbabwe, she WhatsApp’s more often. I told you she is married and has three kids...sometimes when we WhatsApp if she is home we chat with all of them, she lets them join our conversation if it is just catching up stuff. Yah...things like that. Sometimes she will see something on disability and WhatsApp to me. Like she saw an automatic wheelchair somewhere in those posh Malls and she was like “(...) I saw this very nice automatic wheelchair and I wanted to steal it and bring it to you” (Laughing). Sometimes she just takes pictures and sends it to me. You know she is just this funny character. (Rukia, PA, 2017)

She also chats with some of her course mates who live near her apartment particularly those who often offer to help push her to campus:
We just chat, sometimes they want to know where I am like if I am in campus they will be like let’s go to the Cafeteria and have lunch…but sometimes they will WhatsApp and if am in the room they say, I am coming, nakuja tupike [I am coming, we will cook together]. (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

Individually, Rukia says that Facebook, WhatsApp, and Twitter have provided her a platform to communicate her own ideas and opinions about issues that are dear to her:

Yes, I see people’s contributions…but I have my own opinions about these things too. I…normally just write my thoughts. Like the disability day I told you, you know it is normally a whole week and then a final day. I just wrote what I thought it means for me, I shared my storor [story]. (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

**Rukia’s use of social media for looking forwards towards the future**

Besides the need to keep in touch with friends, Rukia says that some of these friends help her get to know about opportunities:

I think it really helps. I get a lot of information through keeping in touch on social media. You know by keeping in touch, I have gotten to know of so many things and opportunities through the friends that I keep in touch with…Like this… (name of University) I could not be here…but you see just one chat on Facebook changed my story…She really helped me. (Rukia, PA, 2017).

Rukia applies for most of these opportunities even though she doesn’t get all of them. Even then, some of these friends encourage her to keep trying:

We were in the Wings to Fly scholarship together, but she was lucky. After form four she was admitted to the African Leadership Academy\(^\text{20}\) in South Africa. You know there, they get so much information about available opportunities in different parts of the world… she just WhatsApp’s the links. She is like, “Try apply for this one…, try apply for this one…” She insists that I keep trying the different opportunities, even short-term leadership courses. (Rukia, SMM, 2017).

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\(^{20}\) This is a two-year residential secondary school that admits high performing African youth with leadership skills.
But Rukia is not just a passive beneficiary of this information and the opportunities. When she gets to know of new opportunities, she also shares them with such friends:

> You see, like whenever I know of opportunities that maybe my friends don’t know, I share it with them… Like the G20 now that I know that it happens every year. I told my friends…so I will encourage them to apply next year also (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

Rukia admires and follows some people whom she describes as her role models because they have impacted her life. She has linked three of her favourite platforms (Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp) so as to be able to follow them easily:

> I follow people like…my role models. Like Julie Gichuru, people whose postings and contribution can build me, people like Fred Ouko these are people who are impacting society, Kina Larry Madowo, Michelle Obama, people who have good content, people I can tap from mmm…of course. Also, Winnie Odera, the one I told you earlier, she works in the slums…you know she is an activist for people’s rights…like now she was invited to speak in New York, I saw her posts and pictures on FB. (Rukia, PA, 2017)

Two of the above role models (Julie and Larry) are big media personalities in Kenya. Interestingly, about three months after the fieldwork, Rukia was featured in a talk show that is normally hosted by Julie in one of the TV stations. Fred Ouko is a person with disability and the founder of one of the NGO’s that supports students with disabilities especially for skills development after secondary education. Apart from Fred, there are other people with disabilities internationally who she also regards as role models and follows constantly:

> Yah…there are people with disabilities…of course a lot. Coz, like when I read their posts, am like aii..zinanjenga [they impact me] and I am like… if people like Nick, you know him yah…he is from Australia…look at him and his disability, you read his postings and the things he is doing and you are like, that is where I want to be, not just sitting because I have a disability yah…(Rukia, PA, 2017)
Not only does she follow these role models but also reaches out to them through their identified social media platforms. She says she is now friends with one of them through social media:

I have been following a lady, she is from Nigeria and she is like me, she uses a wheelchair. But her disability was because of an accident. She is actually a married woman. She has a YouTube channel where she posts a video of what she is doing every week...Yes, I kept leaving my comments once, twice..., just like that and now we are like tight friends. (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

Nonetheless, in her use of these media, Rukia is also conscious that sometimes it takes ‘away too much’ from her both in terms of time spent online and money to buy internet bundles when she is away from free Wi-Fi. One of the pictures she took to represent what social media means to her was an empty pocket (see chapter 7): “It is just crazy, it empties our pockets...I think you just need to be very careful to use social media for your advantage’. (Rukia, PA, 2017).

Rukia says that she wants to marry and have a family of her own. She has shared this with her married friend at campus and who also encouraged her:

I mean, we are friends we share all life issues...Like there is this time she saw a picture of a lady on a wheelchair getting married and she was marrying a normal person, you know, the man was not disabled. And she took pictures and WhatsApped it to me. And she said, “(...) you know, I saw them, and I remembered you,” I mean she is so sweet. (Rukia, PA, 2017).

6.2.4 Ken’s background and educational journey

Ken (21) is a very quiet but welcoming second year information technology (IT) student majoring in cyber-security. He loves, ‘any IT related stuff,’ and is in University B as Rukia above. He says he has: “Physical disabilities caused by brittle bone disease...but some people at home say it is witchcraft, others say it is a curse, but I don’t listen to them.” (Ken, LHI, 2017). He uses a wheelchair for much of his mobility outside of his accommodation. He also has underarm crutches which he uses to move around to avoid too much sitting around because of his health condition, but he can only use these crutches in barrier free environment to avoid further fractures on his body:
Like I can’t risk leaving this compound with the crutches...no no...like you have seen, that road is full of potholes and my back still hurts...that’s why I look too small...I am very careful. (Ken, LHI, 2017)

Ken is the last born of two siblings; his sister and best friend finished her undergraduate course recently and is living with their aunt in the city about one hour away from Ken’s accommodation. Although Ken lost his mother at the age of ten, he still has very fond memories of her:

She used to call me Mwendwa [loved one] she really loved me. She is the one who took me to school every day even though she was sick most of the times. She told the teachers to take good care of me...even when I went to boarding, she remembered all my orthopaedic appointments. We were always amongst the first people on the line to see the doctors and do you know how far Kijabe\textsuperscript{21} is from my home? If she was still alive today, I am sure they would not have amputated my leg. (Ken, LHI, 2017).

Ken’s father is a medical doctor and runs his own surgery in their home area in Machakos County (see Appendix 5) about three hours away from Nairobi. Ken says that their relationship is not as good as it was before his mother passed on. But for the financial support which he receives from his father, Ken feels emotionally detached from him:

He married two wives after my mom died, it is just like he is there, but he is not, you know...me and my sister became like foreigners in our own home...It is just because of my maternal grandmother that we have survived, also me and my sister we are very close. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

Ken occasionally does some online part-time jobs and has recently applied for, ‘another good one at Google’. He is hopeful to get it so that he can stop relying on his father, whom he thinks is heavily burdened financially because of ‘competition’ between his two step-mothers to spend the family money. Ken started his primary education in a school near his home but transferred later to a boarding special school. After his KCPE, he was admitted to a special secondary school adjacent to the primary school. The school’s infrastructure was accommodative of his needs and the teachers were very friendly and always encouraging them. He loved sciences and graduated with a B+ thus qualifying for

\textsuperscript{21} A private church sponsored hospital that offers subsidised orthopaedic health services.
admission through government sponsorship. Ken was admitted for a Bachelor of Science degree in one of the public universities; however, this was not his choice. He wanted to study IT, so he appealed but this was declined, he thus refused to take the offer. Ken is happy that his father agreed to pay for him to pursue IT at his current University. He loves the course and the University although, “it is a bit hard to fit well in this (University) of the rich…sometimes you get that look that tells you kind of you don’t belong here…but I am learning to survive anyway.” (Ken, LHI, 2017)

Ken lives in a private accommodation not far from the University. He shares a room with a friend who is also a former classmate in secondary school; he said the friend was very kind in helping push him to campus and back every day:

I think it would have really been hard for me to push the wheelchair around here. As you have seen, those potholes...., it is a good thing (friend’s name) got the scholarship to study here, I am lucky to have him around. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

Ken noted that though the accommodation was not the best, it had the basics, “we have all that we need to survive…like Wi-Fi, water, electricity and the security is good, and I can move around easily.” (Ken, LHI, 2017). They cost-share the rent and bills, which are around KSHS 30, 000 (about £250) per month. There are a few other students living in the property most of whom are under sponsorship too:

You know this area is a no no for most students of (University B), it is just for the few like us who don’t mind, like even the sponsorship is not enough…but we know how to survive, and people just support one another. (Ken, LHI, 2017).

Ken and his friend take turns to do the house chores; he said that the friend was like a real brother to him. Ken’s sister often visited to spend time with them over the weekends; she brings them food and sometimes takes them out to visit places around. As outlined in chapter 5, the University has most of the facilities that Ken needs for his studies. He highlights that even the IT lab is modern, and the internet is faster there compared to other places within the campus. He is an active member of the IT club and spends most of his free time in the lab where he said he felt most comfortable:
I like studying, doing stuff online, when I am not in class, you will always find me in the lab… I hope to come up with a big innovation one of these days. That is the only place in this (...) where the lifts work properly. (Ken, SMM, 2017)

He was the only student with disability doing IT at the time although another one had graduated a year ago. Like Rukia above, Ken was a member of the task-force on disability which was drafting a disability policy for the University. He was happy that he and one of his IT lecturers were working on IT related issues for the policy:

Like understanding what ICT policies we have in Kenya and fitting them to (...), just finding out what IT stuff need to be in place here, so that is my input…also I am learning a lot from him you know. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

He has also participated in some disability solidarity activities together with his colleagues at the University but says he dislikes making complaints or seeking sympathy:

I don’t like going around complaining, these people…even the admin. knows very well that we are here, they just refuse to do the right things to accommodate our needs. We just need to act where we can, make our voices heard but also work very hard and prove these guys wrong… and those of us who can sue like that lady I told you about, that is also good. (Ken, SMM, 2017)

At campus, Ken keeps to himself mostly, “because this is not like public Universities, it’s a little hard to find someone to relate with easily” (Ken, SMM, 2017). Even the few friends that he tries to socialize with are rarely in campus, so they mostly communicate via WhatsApp, “they come shortly, like technical appearance and then they disappear, they are always out for socials”. (Ken, SMM, 2017). One of them whom Ken described as ‘a little friendly’ sometimes invites him for parties at his place, in one of the well-to-do estates near the campus. Ken has attended twice but he said he did not like the, “loud music, excessive drinking and other crazy stuff…it is not my thing…also you know I fear him giving me a lift back to my room when he is drunk”. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

**Ken’ use of social media**

Ken has been using Facebook for almost seven years. His sister is the one who helped him open the account just before she joined University; he was home for holidays from
secondary school. The sister felt that she would be far away and wanted to keep in touch with him:

You know she is like my mother, she always wants to know how I am doing…she was worried that Moi (her University) was far away from home that is why she thought FB would help us keep in touch. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

When Ken went back to school, he would secretly go online using the only computer in the school library where he was the prefect in-charge:

In the evenings after classes, I used to pretend that I was going to read in the library, and you know, not many people knew that the internet was working so they were not interested…that is how I used it…we did not chat for long because I was afraid of being caught by the librarian, but I still managed. (Ken, LHI, 2017).

In addition to Facebook, Ken also uses Academia, Quora, Twitter, YouTube and WhatsApp. He spends 4-5 hours daily on social media although he said that much of it was on academic related sites:

You know me I spend a lot of time online because I don’t go clubbing. So, I am just there, thinking about these assignments and I keep trying different things online, then I watch the YouTube tutorials yah. (Ken, SMD, 2017).

**Ken’s use of social media as a student**

He spends a significant amount of his time on what he calls ‘academic social media sites’ particularly Academia and Quora, which in his view are good resources for his studies:

They are like my library, you see there is so much information there, I get a lot of my IT stuff from there…like Quora, I use it for serious academic stuff, I go there to get things for my research, assignments yah…I even realized that most of the questions that we do in class, it is like some of our lecturers just lift them from there. Because sometimes I look and it is like word for word. So, for me, I spend a lot of time shuffling between these two especially because of my studies. (Ken, SMD, 2017).
Besides the two sites, Ken mentioned that YouTube had ‘great tutorial videos’. He became a regular user of Quora when he joined second year after they were:

Given some heavy stuff assignments, you know, stuff that we had not done. And you see nobody in class even had a clue what to do…so when I found almost all the answers on Quora, I just bookmarked it. (Ken, SMD, 2017).

He says he likes asking questions on Quora because he thinks that the site is mostly used by professionals:

But the good thing with Quora, the people who respond are professionals in those areas which you could be asking. So, the answers you get are always almost correct or related to what you could be looking for. (Ken, LHI, 2017)

Ken highlighted that it was possible to get further references through the forum because people on the forum often give suggestions on further references. He has also used Quora to research on disability related policies where he finds ‘useful materials’ which he uses in preparation for his presentations at the disability taskforce. For class discussions and assignments, Ken and his classmates use WhatsApp. Although they are required to post their answers on the class online Blackboard, Ken notes that much of this is done on WhatsApp because most of the times this is seen as the easiest way for the:

Rich kids to befriend you…but they are not real friendships; it is just because of assignments…they ask for your number in class when things are tough then they WhatsApp you asking for help with the assignments so that they can post. (Ken, LHI, 2017).

In addition, if the assignments require class presentations, Ken noted that they often do their rehearsals on WhatsApp. He mentioned that twice he has been added into WhatsApp groups by peers he was not conversant with. But he could tell they were his classmates because of the topics they were discussing; in such groups he sometimes keeps silent, observes or just leave:

So, normally, I just take a back seat, watch what is happening, maybe what stuff they are sharing and if it is something I am interested in, I contribute once and keep silent again. You know these guys normally want for you to do the
assignments for them, so I am just careful, but most of the times I just leave the group. (Ken, LHI, 2017)

But he has a few classmates in his IT classes who he feels are genuine; with such friends, they hold ‘good discussions’ on WhatsApp:

You know like the friend I told you about, the one who invites me to his place he is a little different, him he chats even other times, so it is easy to share ideas during assignments…so sometimes he WhatsApp’s a question and if I know the answer I respond, I also do the same.(Ken, SMM, 2017)

According to Ken, this is a friend he can easily chat with for updates in case he needed information about a class, “With him, I WhatsApp like, if I want to chat about something briefly. We also chat, if I want to be updated on a class I missed I will just WhatsApp him”. (Ken, SMM, 2017). He loves watching and exchanging chats on YouTube tutorial videos with his friends who study or work in IT related jobs:

You know much of my IT training requires very practical stuff. Like you learn as you do, so that is why I love YouTube because it has many tutorials on the stuff we do…like that friend who graduated last year, he normally sends me YouTube links, sometimes he will WhatsApp me a link so I just go and check it up on YouTube…even when I have project assignments, I check for YouTube tutorials because they help me understand better. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

**Ken’s use of social media as a community member**

Ken has a few close family members and a sizeable network of friends on Facebook and WhatsApp with whom he chats and shares fun videos regularly. His social media diary shows that his sister is the closest family/friend in his life; he chats with her repeatedly throughout the day:

She is the closest family member and my best friend, she is the only person I chat with throughout the day…I told you we were like just alone growing up so our bond is tight, we love and support each other, we can chat and chat and share our lives freely…like she tells me her stuff, she knows my stuff, there are no secrets you know she is my best friend so we spend a lot of time on
WhatsApp it is like we are just together even though she is not here. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

The other family members that are closest to him and he often chats with are some of his cousins:

They are mostly from my mom’s side of the family, you know those that have stood with us all these years, those are the ones we associate with. I can say they are my other close family members…we have a WhatsApp group for cousins with them, we bash with them…like birthdays, graduations, December holidays yah, such, just fun activities for getting us together. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

Apart from these family members, Ken uses Facebook and WhatsApp to chat with his childhood friends and former schoolmates. He said that Facebook was helpful in tracing such old friends after which they share each other’s phone numbers then connect on WhatsApp. Ken felt that there was a slight difference between the use of these two media. While Facebook was more open to a wide range of friends:

WhatsApp is mostly for more close people, and you know it is even more private because it's mostly one to one. So not everybody sees the stuff you are posting to each other. That’s why it is mostly for close family and friends. (Ken, LHI, 2017).

Ken has recently joined a ‘big alumni Facebook group’ for his former secondary school. He attended the first alumni meeting last year, He mentioned that the meeting was a good encouragement for him. Moreover, Ken feels that the group is helpful with regards to information on disability issues. “Like if you find something that is challenging like an issue on disability that is challenging you can approach the group, just put it on the FB forum.” (Ken, SMM, 2017).

After the reunion, Ken and his former classmates formed a WhatsApp group. He said this was a much smaller group and members could relate better because, “You know we spent four years together, so kind of it is a tight group yah …like us we were thirty in the class, we know each other very well.”(Ken, SMM, 2017). He is the one who formed the initial group but he has since invited two other colleagues to help him administer it. Although currently the group is just for ‘catching up’, they are hoping to extend their activities:
Not just chats we have said we shall be supporting each other where we can. You know like it is just a few of us in campus, others are in vocational training, but most people are just at home. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

Ken has linked his Facebook to his ‘not very active’ Twitter account. Although he is not a big Twitter fan, “I just link it so that I know what is trending, you know it is much easier with Twitter but generally that is not my place.” (Ken, LHI, 2017). He said he liked #KOT (Kenyans on Twitter) mostly for current affairs and politics. He also followed Trump tweets, “generally just for laughs, the guy’s tweets just makes me wonder you know.”(Ken, LHI, 2017)

He says that YouTube is his ‘place of entertainment and news’. He uses it often to watch news, listen to music, watch videos and movies:

My classes end on Thursday afternoon, that is when I go to YouTube to catch up on all the news, comedies, talk shows like all the stuff I missed during the week… that is how I relax mostly, on weekends. (Ken, SMD, 2017).

He usually shares some of his favourite YouTube videos with his sister.

**Ken’s social media use for looking forward towards the future**

Ken has recently joined LinkedIn, which he thinks is good for strategizing for the future: “you know that is where you get the who is who in your profession, so you can link with them.” (Ken, LHI, 2017). He has also done some IT related online part-time jobs which a former colleague had shared with him via WhatsApp. He is happy about it because he earned ‘good’ money to supplement the pocket money from his father:

When I joined campus, there was a chap from my former high school doing IT here, he is like my mentor these days. He showed me many things, even the IT alumni network he said that one can join before graduating… guys just put the jobs on the group that is how I get them. Even the google job that I applied for, it was on the group. (Ken, LHI, 2017).

This friend now works for one of the biggest mobile phone companies in the country and is helping Ken understand, “how things are in the job market…you know that is the real place for applying these IT skills we are learning now”. (Ken, LHI, 2017)
Ken also mentioned that he gets some money from his classmates:

I don’t mind spending more time on Quora and Academia because sometimes I get some good money out of it. I told you these kids here are always clubbing…That is where I make my money (laughing)…when they come and they have not done assignments, they ask for answers from me, I ask them to pay. After all I have spent my time doing all the search, reading, trying to patch the answers you know…I can’t give them for free. (Ken, SMD, 2017)

At the reunion meeting mentioned earlier Ken said he had felt encouraged to study hard with confidence for the future:

I thought it was important because I got to see that there were people like me excelling out there yaah… You know sometimes you ask yourself after going to school after doing all these hard stuff here at campus, where to next? Will I get a job and start a family? So, meeting those who are already working was an encouragement for me. You know even two of our MPs, Bishop Mutemi and Janet they came. I didn’t know they were alumni, so it was good that we met…now we are on the FB together…I think it is a good support network. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

Ken reported that some of the older members of the alumni who work in different sectors had agreed to mentor Ken and others who are currently studying:

It was good because they are now helping…They know many things like what is required in some jobs where they work, like what you need to do, so they act as mentors to us…also I have been seeing them post jobs and internship opportunities on the forum which is good. (Ken, SMM, 2017).

6.2.5 Neema’s background and educational journey

Neema (23) is a third-year education student majoring in History and Swahili in University C. She uses a wheelchair due to a congenital related paralysis (spina bifida). She is the last born in a family of five; and comes from Laikipia County which is about six hours away from Nairobi by bus. At the time of the interview, only she and an older brother still lived at home with their parents. Although her parents live together, Neema says that their
relationship is not stable and that only the mother was responsible for the family. Despite owning a successful business, the father stopped supporting the family because of Neema’s condition:

He used to beat my mom frequently… alisema hana chakula ya kiwete [he said he has no food for a disabled]… he tells her to take me back where she got me from. (Neema, LHI, 2017).

Neema has a very kind uncle who lives a few miles from her University. Whenever Neema needs to travel either within the city or back to her home in the village, the uncle makes arrangements and ensures that she travels safely and with minimal discomfort. During short holidays, Neema stays at the uncle’s home, where she feels welcomed. Between nursery and class six, Neema studied in her home area in a regular primary school. Later on, her mother transferred her to an integrated boarding school which admitted students with physical disabilities to learn alongside their regular peers. She thought that Neema would get better help in this school to prepare for her KCPE which she passed well. But Neema’s transition to secondary school was initially difficult. Despite gaining admission to a provincial girls’ school of her choice, the principal had refused to admit her arguing that the school did not have the right facilities to support her. This broke Neema down: luckily, by this time she had been taken in by an NGO which was willing to pay for her fees from secondary school onwards. This NGO intervened on her behalf:

The program manager and some volunteers from the area went to the school and demanded that I be admitted, that it was my right…you know they had even invited the press…they wanted to sue the school, I think the principal was afraid. She just allowed me in. (Neema, LHI, 2017).

The NGO also helped sensitise the school community about Neema’s condition and the need to accept her. After this intervention Neema was able to study with ease:

I enjoyed my secondary education…yes, I was the only one with a disability, but everybody was kind...and I made many friends some of them are here with me and we are still tight. (Neema, LHI, 2017).

Through the NGO, Neema visited Italy on an exchange program while in Form 3, she says that she learned a lot about how PWD are provided for there. Before joining her current
University, Neema had been admitted to a different one near her home area but the conditions there were unfriendly, so she turned down the offer:

It was not friendly; the environment was not friendly for me at all…you know the campus is in a hilly place, so I refused. I applied here because someone told me that (name of University) is inclusive…like they accommodate all people…you know even if it is not a 100 percent, it is far much better here. (Neema, LHI, 2017).

The new University also offered a course whose subject combination she felt suited her best, so she requested for a transfer and was granted. However, this change of subject affected her government sponsorship. She only managed to stay on because the NGO continued to support her and thus currently studies as a self-sponsored student. Interestingly, Neema had been advised that if she had joined the special education program, she would easily get government sponsorship, but she turned down the offer:

I am not doing special education… you know they advise us that if you have a disability it’s better to do the special education degree… But me I said no. You know if I become a teacher and work in a normal school, I will change that school, like their attitudes about disability. We need to change these schools because everybody should study anywhere not just putting us in special schools…I want to go to a place where there is no change so that I can bring the change myself. (Neema, LHI, 2017).

Neema lives alone in a spacious room in the students’ halls at the campus. As shown in chapter 5, this is amongst one of the first universities in the country to admit students with disabilities. The University has reserved and adjusted several rooms in various hostels to accommodate students depending on their needs. Neema cooks her own meals but some of her friends often bring their own food to cook and share with her. This is common in the students’ halls. Neema is active in the Christian Union, the University Students’ Association and is a member of the Students with Disabilities Association too, which she describes as, “our voice here at (…), we meet and share experiences. And if a member has an issue this is where we channel them, it helps us…we have elected our own people.” (Neema, LHI, 2017).

Neema’s use of social media
Neema uses Facebook and WhatsApp repeatedly throughout the day and loves watching YouTube videos in the evenings whenever she can. She has been using social media for four years now. Facebook was her first access to social media soon after secondary school:

I heard about it when I visited Italy. The family who hosted me there were using it … after KCSE, they send me this phone and I registered, then we started chatting with them, they were my first friends on FB. (Neema, SMM, 2017).

Since then Neema’s network of friends has grown and so has her use which varies between ‘chatting with friends, learning stuff and watching YouTube videos.’ She uses Facebook and WhatsApp almost daily ‘especially now that we have free Wi-Fi here.’ Her social media diary showed that she spends about three hours daily on the three platforms.

**Neema’s use of social media as a student**

According to Neema, social media is ‘not so much for learning purposes.’ The few times she has used it for school related work was mainly during their writing groups with friends from her history class:

We have a group where we want to develop writing as a habit…so like we sit down together and write. Some about politics, others historical events you know we are historians yah and so on… when we have done like a good article that is when we share, we post them on the class FB page…and you know even fourth years are members so sometimes you hear them say, that is a good article and they advise us maybe to develop it…we presented one on politics to the class and the lecturer was impressed. (Neema, LHI, 2017)

She has also read a few articles on Facebook which are mainly related to her courses, but she is not keen to use such resources for assignments because: “especially if someone just posts and they don’t say where they got it, like they don’t give references, you have to be careful with academic stuff.” (Neema, LHI, 2017). For Neema, social media is significant for social participation with others within and outside of HE. Much of her activities on Facebook and WhatsApp are with her large network of friends, at campus, those who are abroad in Italy, former classmates, new friends and friends from her church. She uses the two platforms interchangeably with these friends although WhatsApp was more popular.
for her chats with her friends at campus. Neema says that she chats with them for many reasons:

Like right now it is mostly WhatsApp… Yah first of all these are my friends we chat about friends stuff, you know friends take away loneliness no one wants to be lonely… Also, when you are with such friends, you learn things, like girl stuff yah, we share experiences… or sometimes maybe to find out where they are or for them to find me after class or we just chat and have fun no serious stuff just fun you know (Neema, SMM, 2017).

Whenever she is not able reach these friends physically, Neema uses WhatsApp to break the barriers:

Now like most of them see… I can’t go to their places because you know others live upstairs, so mostly they come to my place but if I want to catch up and they are in their place, we just WhatsApp… so even if my wheelchair can’t get me there, my WhatsApp does (Neema, SMM, 2017).

Her chats with these friends are mostly social although sometimes school related issues interjected their conversations:

Not that we do assignments on Facebook or WhatsApp it’s just maybe a reminder like someone may be like by the way (….), have you done your assignment or something like do you know there is this and that activity happening in the department are you going? Or like are you coming to class, do you want me to reserve a space for you? (Neema, SMM, 2017).

The University Students Association has a Facebook group and Neema is a member. She says it helps her know what is happening in campus:

Like right now you know the lecturers are on strike, so it is good to know what people are thinking… or complain if something is wrong… also just to know what is happening around campus (Neema, SMM, 2017).

Although she joins in some of the conversations, she says that she is not an active contributor on the forum. She is more active on the Students with Disabilities’ Association Facebook group:
You know that one now affects me directly…like stuff that concerns us, so we engage there properly…and our representatives are also there so they take those issues that need the attention of the admin to them. I think I am more active there (Neema, SMM, 2017).

Another Facebook group that Neema liked was one with her ‘former classmates’ from secondary school. Some of these friends were with her in the same campus, others were in universities in different parts of the country while others are involved in different activities in adult living. She mentioned that this group was good for maintaining their friendship:

We remember most of those things we did together in high school…some crazy girls’ stuff yah, we share jokes like how maybe we used to be punished and how we survived some of those tough teachers (Neema, SMM, 2017).

Through this group, Neema and her friends were planning to start a merry-go-round to visit one another in what she referred to as, ‘keeping an eye on each other.’ Besides her campus friendships, Neema loves catching up with her friends in Italy whom she sees as an extended family. They often exchanged pictures with one another. She prefers to chat with the mother and the daughter because they are of the same gender. The daughter had tried to introduce Neema to Snapchat which she did not like and therefore closed the account. Neema is also a member of her church Facebook group in Nairobi where she attends while at campus. The church is outside of campus and for her Facebook makes it possible to remain connected and know what is happening during the mid-week activities she rarely attends. She finds the group helpful in other ways and is often the ‘first place she goes to’ every day in the mornings:

I feel good when I wake up in the morning and someone is inspiring me, like a bible verse… it makes my day you know…it is good for spiritual nourishment and also it is a good support group…like someone is concerned, they want to know how one is doing (Neema, SMD, 2017).

Two of Neema’s older siblings are on Facebook and she occasionally chats with them, mainly about their family issues. She was, however, hesitant about sharing more about their conversations. She also mentioned that the siblings are not very active online because

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22 An informal social group which consists of people who have common interests, but mainly seen as a socio-economic support group as members often make financial contributions to support income - generating activities.
buying internet bundles in the village is expensive. Besides her social participation with others, Neema likes YouTube, which she frequents for leisure purposes. It is particularly helpful because:

Sometimes this life is lonely, like when you are on the wheelchair you can’t move around a lot…like my friends they can hop on a matatu (bus) anytime…sometimes you are just down, and you just want something to cheer you up…YouTube videos like Churchill show, gospel music, sermons and inspiring videos on disabilities those ones really help me (Neema, LHI, 2017).

**Neema’s use of social media for looking forward towards the future**

Neema likes Facebook because she finds helpful resources about her condition. She is a member of the Spina Bifida and Hydrocephalus Association of Kenya (SHAK) which she was to introduced to by one of her Facebook friends who is also a member: She joined SHAK in first year and has since been involved in many of various activities which they organised aimed at supporting members to know their strengths and develop them within their communities. Neema’s group has a big population of youth her age and parents with their child:

I joined the youth group because we share youth stuff on FB… like now I am in campus and some are in different colleges, so we come up with ideas, and suggestions to develop them and then we meet somewhere in the city and you know SHAK pays for everything…so like we are not left behind by others (Neema, SMM, 2017).

In addition, through Facebook, Neema is able to follow the activities of SHAK online where she often finds useful information on various topics of interest to her:

Sometimes they bring people mostly doctors who can educate you, train you about something about the condition …like hygiene is very important for us yah, such things. So, like if you don’t have time to attend all the meetings, you can read from the posts on FB. (Neema, SMM, 2017).

At times, SHAK uses the Facebook group to share opportunities or information on other organisations that work with PWD in the country which they encourage members to follow through:
There are many opportunities that they post...for example you know they connect you to maybe the National Council for the disabled, or other organizations they work with like APDK23 so if you need something like a wheel chair they can help, that is where I learned how I can get a better wheelchair, I applied and I got this one...they even advise you on how to fill the forms and how to get to those offices. (Neema, SMM, 2017).

Through support from SHAK, Neema and her group hope to start a photocopying and printing kiosk in the University. She has volunteered to help run the business in her fourth year because by then her workload will have reduced. They hope to advertise their services through Facebook:

We already have one in (University A), so we are also planning to request for more funding to extend the business here. You know students will always need such...and since I am here, I can do it...I have informed our representative at the council so that we that are considered during the next allocations of shops...then we shall go on FB and advertise. (Neema, SMM, 2017).

Besides her connections on SHAK, Neema is also friends with a lady called Mona on Facebook whom she connects with in many ways. Although they have not shared much, Neema likes the information that Mona posts on her page:

She uses a wheel chair like me, she told me she has spina bifida and also a problem with her bones, it is a very delicate problem...but you know I really connect with her... and she has so much information...like how to get scholarships for further studies you know she is now finishing her Masters...also now I understand my condition better because of the stuff she has been sharing... She even posts links where one can read further...also even hygiene for me is important because of sitting in the wheel chair for a long time you can get sores, so such hygiene stuff and creative ideas on how to improvise things as a lady. (Neema, SMM, 2017).

As a teacher trainee, Neema looks forward to being a teacher. In high school, she always admired her Swahili teacher and had even been invited to visit her family during one of the December holidays. This teacher has since become one of her mentors:

23 The Association for Physically Disabled of Kenya is a charity that provides counselling, rehabilitation services and vocational training mainly for people with physical disabilities in the country.
We share a lot on FB. Like last week she was telling me about the process of being registered by the TSC so that I can become recognized as teacher. She send me the link, but I have to wait until I graduate (Neema, SMM, 2017).

6.2.6 Mtawala’s background and educational journey

Mtawala (24) is a final year education student majoring in History and Christian Religious Education in University C. He has low vision but occasionally uses a white cane, “sometimes I don’t know what happens, so nowadays I just carry it, it’s good for support”. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017). He is an elected student leader representing the interests of students with special needs in the Student and the University Council. He describes himself as ‘a politician at heart’.

His family lives near the border of Kenya and Tanzania. The journey to his home would normally take two and a half days and from Nairobi but the roads are in bad condition and the buses very unreliable, so it takes longer. His mother is a second wife in a big polygamous family, and he is ‘one of her many children’. He likes his mother and sympathises with her because he knows their cultural norms restrict her desire to support him in the way she would want to, “you know as a woman in Maasai land, she has no say…my father makes all the decisions”. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017).

Mtawala did not share much information about his father whom he says has: “Only started treating me as his child recently after he learned about my success as a student leader here.” (Mtawala, LHI, 2017). According to him, his family had not been supportive of his education from an early age. His father was opposed to his coming to University far away in Nairobi for fear that Mtawala would not manage life in the city. However, Mtawala thought he was not sincere. He highlighted that he felt abandoned from early in life:

He did not want to pay for me that is why he was opposing my coming here. You know even in primary school at home many times he refused to buy me reading books…also, I was in a boarding secondary school and you know for four years nobody came to visit me …no, it was not far from home (Mtawala, LHI, 2017).

According to Mtawala, his father is rich (owns a lot of cattle) but the family is not stable because of issues of jealousy and witchcraft. As a child, Mtawala felt different from the others as his mother was always hiding him. Some family members often, “joked about me
because they could see that I was disabled”. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017). He has little communication with his family, and he has not been back home for the past two years. He is also not keen on returning to his family but says he wants to visit with his childhood friends, some of whom are now married.

Mtawala attended a regular primary school near his home but experienced a lot of challenges because he could not see the blackboard or read the regular print books. Unlike other students who benefited from the free primary education materials, his father had to buy him the reading/writing materials that he needed. This made the father view Mtawala as a ‘burden’. The father was about to withdraw him from school when an NGO stepped in. The NGO provided all the resources that he needed and later on paid his secondary education in a special boarding school for the Blind where he sat his exams.

He did not attain the required minimum grade of C+ for direct admission to University; however, because of affirmative action (see chapter 2) he secured a place after scoring grade C plain. He had applied and received a bursary from his constituency development fund which paid for his first two years at the University. To get money for his upkeep Mtawala said he had to sell some of his own cows. Since becoming a student leader Mtawala was lucky; he did not have to pay since the University had waived all the fees for his third and final year.

Mtawala lives in his own room in a hostel where all student leaders are housed. Mtawala has strong leadership qualities. One afternoon after my interview with him, we walked past several students, all of whom fondly greeted him using the term mtetezi [spokesman]; he regularly stopped to acknowledge them. He said that student elections were tough, but he had campaigned successfully and got elected:

And you know this was the second time I was vying…I had tried in second year sikutobo [I was not elected] … I did not give up…also this time I had a big team of supporters and FB also helped…I shared my agenda very well. It was not easy, but I trounced my other opponents overwhelmingly. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017)

He was enthusiastic about his role as a representative of fellow students with disabilities: ‘I am their ears, eyes and mouth in the council…anything that concerns my members, I voice it’. After University, Mtawala hopes to get a job in the city and seek a political office in
future either as an elected or nominated MP. He said that he had already started looking around to see which political party to affiliate with.

Mtawala’s use of social media.

Mtawala regularly uses Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp and occasionally follows some blogs. He started with Facebook and has been using it for four years. He was introduced to Facebook by a social worker who worked with the NGO that paid his fees: “You know after my exams I stayed at the school to help…the guy was always on his phone, so I asked him what he was doing...that is when I heard about FB and the others”. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017). But, he did not join until six months later when he started University and bought his own phone. He uses both the phone and his laptop to go online. Mtawala was more active on Facebook where he felt he had better access to his network of friends and constituents:

As you know many times we leaders here use FB to communicate with the students…so you see, I have to be on FB most times…also me as a leader, I am keen to know what issues they are raising, what is happening where yah…things like that I have to be alert and you know sometimes comrades are not patient (Mtawala, LHI, 2017).

On average he spends three hours daily on all three social media mentioned earlier although he is mostly on Facebook. Despite his access to a large audience and the desire to maintain it for his ‘political interests’, Mtawala is cautious about accepting friend requests from people he is not familiar with:

I chat with people on the group easily but on my own page no no…it is very hard and rare, I have to know you or at least meet you before I befriend you on my FB page…I am very cautious not just accepting every request, I think it is because of past experiences growing up.(Mtawala, LHI, 2017).

Mtawala’s use of social media as a student

Unlike many of the other participants, Mtawala was not keen on using social media for his studies. On the few occasions that he did, this was mainly as a resource to research on topics of his own interest or when he joined the history Facebook group which he liked:

We have a network of historians on FB. There are different people there, I think even people who have already graduated are still there because some of the
materials you get…like you can tell this is someone higher than you…but it is good because you get all these materials and when you read it helps in assignments but mostly just for broadening my understanding of a topic. (Mtawala, SMM, 2017).

In this forum, some members also talked about blogs some of which he often followed:

Like so and so has a very good blog yah…so if you follow the links, you just see who is sharing what you need...Like me I like philosophical arguments and historical facts, such blogs I follow but you know it is not like every time I am there no…and the questions and comments that people leave those I like too.(Mtawala, SMM, 2017)

Mtawala’s use of social media as a community member and student leader

On his personal Facebook page, Mtawala chats with a small group of friends whom he views as close friends, these are people that he knows from growing up and those that he went to school with and current friends at the University. All these are friends he has known in offline spaces before extending the friendship online:

People that I have personally met or known before or someone I know through one of these my friends… It is very hard and rare for me to befriend someone online, I must meet someone first before I can add them as friends…not just to talk to anybody whom I don’t know and have not met. I only connect and chat with people whom I know personally. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017).

Mtawala was very cautious online. He said that life had taught him many lessons and thus he could only befriend and chat with someone he was very sure about. With the close friends, he chatted so as to:

Keep the friendship going…like to catch up on social life you know general life things or sometimes I just go to read inspirational quotes that some of my friends post. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017).

Although he occasionally initiated the chats, it was mostly the friends who started the conversations. He always made effort to like, or comment on, the conversations whenever he went online. Most of Mtawala’s chats with close friends from his home area were updates about what was happening back at home, “you know I have not been there for a
long time now…but it is still home you know”. (Mtawala, SMD, 2017). He had shared his WhatsApp number with some of his close friends and fellow student leaders at the University. He noted that he could not, ‘just give everyone’ his personal number.

As a student leader, Mtawala was an active participant in the Student Association’s Facebook group as he felt that it was an important forum to ‘meet’ and discuss issues with ‘comrades’. By using Facebook in this sense, he felt that he was performing his duties. This forum was the first place he logged into most mornings:

*Ni kama register* [it is like a register] you have to sign in to see what comrades are saying yah…like you get to know what is happening in the various zones at campus. Also, as a leader, just saying hello to them *ile ya tuko panoja* [it is a sign of unity]. (Mtawala, SMM, 2017)

As discussed in chapter 5, at the time of undertaking the research, there was a nationwide lecturers’ strike. Thus, for Mtawala it was a crucial time to keep up to date with students’ communications on the forum:

You know at this time, comrades are idle, there are no classes that is why many of them have left already…but as a leader we are still around, we have to be alert to know their concerns and to communicate back on FB…Or just to pass them any information. (Mtawala, SMM, 2017)

As a representative of his colleagues with disabilities, Mtawala was one of their Facebook group administrators. This was their main meeting place online. They discussed their issues here before taking them to other forums either online or offline. Through this forum, Mtawala listens:

To their issues and respond to those that I can immediately, if not I request for time to consult… You know this FB is our voice here in (…), we can’t go to (…) Road to throw stones\(^{24}\), this FB is our (…) road, *hii ndio sauti ya mnyonge* [this is our voice]. (Mtawala, SMM, 2017)

He frequently used Facebook to ask for his members’ views or complaints before he went for a council meeting or when meeting the dean of students:

\(^{24}\) In Kenya, it is common for University students to mobilise in violent demonstrations including throwing stones on any road near their University so as to draw the attention of the public mainly as a sign of their dissatisfaction with the University management and because of limited options to channel their grievances.
Like the issue of tuktus (rickshaws), the drivers used to be late most times, so you see members used to get to class late, we discussed it several times on the forum, I took it to the dean and these days they are on time, so members are happy. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017)

Mtawala observed that sometimes he felt low because members’ expectations of him were sometimes too high. When he did not seem to fulfil some of these expectations, they:

Attack you on the forum…like recently you know when the strike was being called off, some members were very insensitive, they said that I should have refused the deal because it did not favour us…you know for some of my colleagues in fourth year I understand their concerns …but that’s the best I could do. (Mtawala, SMM, 2017)

Mtawala’s use of social media for looking forwards towards the future

He significantly used social media on activities related to his personal development and future aspirations:

I told you I love politics yah... I follow keenly any such topics…and you know FB is the best place to know about all the politics, the good and the bad… I used it a lot during my campaigns…I put my poster on my wall, I asked my friends to like and support me and you know that really helped…sometimes you go to speak to people and they ask you, oh you are the one? We have seen your poster and they listen to you…And those who were helping me, we communicated a lot through FB. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017)

Mtawala planned to use Facebook to prepare for future campaigns as he hopes to vie for political office although he was not decided on which post he wanted. Hence, he frequently used Facebook and watched popular Kenyan YouTube videos on politics, for porojo za siasa [political gossip]. He thought that this was a good way of learning ‘how these political propaganda works’ before immersing himself into national politics:

I know politics is not easy, inataka ukae ngumu [one must be hardened], like watching the XYZ videos on YouTube, Mutahi Ngunyi, those ones are good…on FB, you just read the various commentaries and you start understanding their language. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017)
At the University, students from his home county had a Facebook page for which he was a member. He thought that this was a good space to start familiarizing himself with other students before sharing his agenda. Two of their local MPs were also members of this umbrella forum and they invited students to the parliament monthly to visit and share their development agendas for their areas. Mtawala had attended a few of these meetings. Besides politics, Mtawala mentioned that he liked farming and that he found useful resources on Facebook to develop this interest which he hopes to pursue upon graduation from college:

I love farming yah...and you know nowadays there are so many people on FB sharing on such… I am also a fan of the Shamba shape-up program, the one that airs on Citizen TV on Saturdays. I like their FB page so I go there…like if I missed any programme or just to see what they have posted and you know I see many people follow them even our professors here…so you read the comments that way you learn more. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017)

6.2.7 Petero’s background and educational journey

Petero is a 22 years old second year environmental science student. He is in University C, as are Neema and Mtawala who were discussed above. He is the middle child of three siblings. His older brother was training as an electrician in a vocational college near Njoro, his home area, which is about three hours away from Nairobi by bus. His last-born sister sat for her KCSE the previous year and was still living with their mother in their rental accommodation. Petero and his family had undergone a lot of challenges, some of which were difficult for him to narrate. Twice, they were affected by post-election violence that had occurred in their home area. They lost all their household property; their house was burned down and land taken away:

I am sure you know the stories, the gangs were ruthless and very organised, so we just ran away from the area…that is how they took over people’s land by force…and you know up to now we can’t go back to our family land. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

Not knowing where to go, Petero’s family and other victims of the violence settled on a public land next to a railway line in Njoro town where they thought they were safer. It was here that Petero encountered another life changing situation following a train accident. He was out grazing cattle with other boys of his age near the railway line, but he has little
recollection of how he ended up under an oncoming train. Although he survived, Petero lost three limbs and now uses prosthetic legs and a hand crutch for support while walking. His balance is poor as he tries to do much of his work using his right hand, the only limb left after the accident: “I had tried to use a wheelchair, but it was hard with only one hand and when you have no one to push you everywhere it is really hard.” (Petero, LHI, 2017).

Petero said that the experience had been very painful and traumatising for the whole family. He spent almost two years in and out of hospital towards the end of his primary education. The situation was made worse when:

> The railway company chased us away from the area and they warned my mother to drop the case…they even threatened to harm us more if we pursued further…I really sympathise with my mother, I think she has suffered more, even more than me…it is just by the grace of God that she has not suffered a mental breakdown. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

The local area councillor had tried to intervene on their behalf, but he too was threatened by ‘big people’ in the railway management who were said to be well connected with the government agencies that would have followed the case. Not even the local disability office could help so the family moved on. Although the accident happened about nine years ago, Petero said he was in constant pain and only managed with the help of pain medication. Notwithstanding the challenges, the family has stood together with a lot of support from his grandparents:

> You know my grandparents took care of my siblings when I was in hospital because my mother was always with me…even now, it is mostly them that support us a lot…my mother now works as a cleaner in a secondary school, but the salary is not enough. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

Petero has great admiration for his mother whom he describes as, ‘strong, courageous and very determined’. Since joining campus, he shares his University loan with her, ‘It is not much but I have to support her, I also pray for her’. He was hopeful that after college he would get a good job and settle her, ‘you know we now live somewhere I don’t like, I want to buy a plot and construct her a house… also I can open her a small business because I know she is capable’. Petero calls and texts her every other day to find out how she is doing. She also calls him when she is not busy at work.
Petero loves studying and is a very successful student. Despite the above tragic accident which happened two years before his KCPE, he still managed high marks that earned him a place in one of his favourite provincial high school for high performing boys in the county. However, his hopes of studying at the school were quashed by the Principal who turned him down when he arrived for registration:

He said that he feared that the other boys would bully me, so he advised my mother to take me to a special school for the disabled…I felt very bad, we went to the DEO, but nothing happened. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

Petero did not want to study far away from his home area; besides, he felt that a special school would not give him the academic support he needed to score good grades for University admission:

You know I always wanted to join University and you see in (…), the main criteria for admission there is having a disability not performance at KCPE, so I was not happy to go there. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

He approached a local day school and requested for admission. The Principal in this school was happy and willing to have him but after the first week, he was worried for Petero because of the distance between his home and the school. “You know it was a really long trek and it was very difficult because that is when I was just starting to use my prosthetics.” (Petero, LHI, 2017).

According to Petero, this Principal is the one who convinced him to consider the special school:

But you know he was very different…actually I can say he is the one who helped me a lot in my secondary education. Even now he is like my mentor, we have become very good friends. You know he even took me to (school) in his car, he also gave us some money to buy the things that were needed for boarding. It is because of him that I agreed to join (…). (Petero, LHI, 2017)

Upon joining the school, Petero’s attitude changed, “I found the teachers very kind and devoted and they really encouraged us to work hard…it was different from what I thought.”(Petero, LHI, 2017). He scored a B+ in his KCSE and thus realised his dream of
joining University. He applied to study architecture but was denied despite having fulfilled the cluster requirements:

You know I thought that frustrations were now over, but this (name of University) even if they say it is the best for students with disabilities, I don’t agree. You know the dean of academics told me openly that I could not do architecture because of my disability…he said that the course was tough, that I could not sketch things with one hand. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

Petero appealed through the disability services office but the director, ‘refused to help me, I think he just feared the dean.’ He was advised to do special education, but he objected. Eventually he settled on his current course which he still doesn’t really like:

It was the only option but after I finish this course and I get a good job, I will apply elsewhere to do my course. I always wanted to be an architecture, I struggled and scored an A in maths even geometry was my best, but they did not even ask me to show them how I can draw or sketch…But I will do it…I have seen so many people with disabilities on YouTube doing great things, I will do it.(Petero, LHI, 2017)

Despite this disappointment Petero is keen about his current studies and continues to score highly with the lowest grade being a B so far. According to him, if he passes well and graduates with a first class, then it will be easy for him to get a scholarship which would be another way of getting fees to pursue architecture. At the University, Petero shares a room with a non-disabled peer whom he gets along well. As a government sponsored student, he gets a student loan which pays for his fees and upkeep. He says this is not enough; to supplement it, he and one of his best friends have a small business:

I told you here we have to survive, so we do some business with him, like we are now farming at his home, so we grow vegetables and sell…His mother helps us like now when we are at college. We also sell things online…just stationery here at campus even some computer things like memory stick and antivirus. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

He is a member of several associations and clubs in the University including; the University Students Association and the Association of Students with Disabilities in the University. He was the current secretary of the Environmental Club through which they
had initiated many environmentally friendly initiatives within and outside their University. Through this club, they visit communities and schools to sensitize them on the need to protect the environment. He said he liked supporting community initiatives because. He is also an active member of the Red Cross club. During the field work I once arrived in college ready to meet him for an interview, but I had to wait for about one hour before our meeting. He had been called in to replace a poorly colleague who was supposed to help in a blood donation event at the campus.

**Petero’s use of social media**

He started using Facebook two years ago just before joining campus. But he knew about it while still in secondary school through one of his senior peers. So, when Petero went to process his University application at a cyber-café in his home area, he asked more about Facebook from the café attendant, who later showed him how to join:

>You know I didn’t have a phone at that time, so I used the computer but after I got my University loan, that is when I bought this phone and now I have been using it to access Facebook. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

In addition to Facebook, he was also active on Academia, Google+ LinkedIn, Quora and YouTube. He has a WhatsApp account but says he has not been active here lately because his phone has a problem. As a result, he had informed his friends and family to connect him on Facebook instead which he uses his laptop to access. According to him, Facebook is good for his social life, but the other platforms are useful for his studies and activities related to his aspirations:

>You know right now this is like a very important part of my life, so I have to try harder. So even if I Facebook, I think others like Academia and Quora can support my studies better, that’s why I spend more time there. (Petero, SMD, 2017)

On average, he spends four hours daily on social media and sometimes even more especially during the weekends if he is within the University.
Petero’s use of social media as a student

Petero uses Quora and Academia a great deal for his academic work at campus. He mentioned that from these two he found a variety of useful reading materials, sometimes even more than what his lecturers gave during class sessions:

But right now it is not just from the lecturers and the few books. I can read and see what other sources; other people say on a given topic, there is a lot of information from the discussions on Quora you just need to ask questions. (Petero, SMD, 2017)

He particularly liked Quora because it gave him an opportunity to contribute his views on any topic. “It is a good forum because anyone can discuss, pose questions, argue answers, anything academic…it is good because I am able to interact with others and give my opinions.” (Petero, SMM, 2017). Moreover, with the information from Quora, he can read ahead of his lecturers, which he thinks is a good practice. He said that Quora was a good forum to research even difficult topics. A friend had once asked Petero a question which he promised to respond to the following day even though he did not know the answer:

I told her I would send her the answers but actually I didn’t have any idea. I just went to Quora and posted the question on the forum. I got so many responses from people all over the world, then I compiled a good summary and explained it to her when we met (laughing) since that time I feel I can tackle any topic. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

It was from his use of Quora that he learned about Academia. Someone had referred to an article in Academia and left a link on Quora, “When I followed it, I only read halfway but to read the whole article I had to register. That is how I joined Academia. Now I can even download articles from there”. (Petero, SMM, 2017). He felt that reading the articles he downloaded from Academia had improved his learning skills:

When I look at the way people present their arguments there…like how they are defending a point it helps me when I write my essays. Also even writing skills you know me I am better in sketching. I was not very good at grammar, putting ideas together and things like punctuations. But now I am learning a lot. (Petero, SMM, 2017)
Petero observed that to make a good argument one needed reliable resources like the ones he reads in Academia: “There are other places you can learn these things but you see Academia is mostly used by professionals…They do the research so I think you can trust it”. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

Apart from Academia and Quora, Petero said that Facebook was helpful in keeping him updated with the current affairs in his study area:

> Like I didn’t know the tallying was starting today…Tallying of elephants in Kenya. Dr. Kahumbu\(^25\) posted it on her FB page she even put some pictures. So that is another good thing with FB even if you don’t have a TV, you still get current affairs. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

He said Facebook was a good place to find academic opportunities such as scholarships, which were posted either by individuals or in the various forums that he belonged to: ‘Sometimes it is just friends who post, or you find them in the groups’. He had applied for one, but the deadline lapsed before he could get all his documents together. His diary showed that some of the long chats he had with some friends on Facebook were enquiries and updates on scholarships and other funding opportunities for studying. Petero liked watching YouTube videos to learn more about his course. According to him, watching a YouTube video after a class was a good way to reinforce what had been taught in class:

> Like when I see things especially things about the environment I don’t forget easily. That is why you will find me watching YouTube videos most evenings….it is also a good place to express my opinions on matters. (Petero, SMD, 2017)

**Petero’s use of social media as a community member**

Petero, his siblings and some cousins have a Facebook group where they discuss family issues. He felt that with Facebook, it was easier to connect since most of them were currently in different parts of the country. In addition to the group, Petero uses Facebook for individual communication with his siblings to catch up on updates about home and the mother:

\(^{25}\) A prominent wildlife campaigner in the country.
So even if I don’t call my mom every day, I know what is happening home daily coz like now my sister is there so when we chat, I know everything…so if there is anything troubling my mom I can call, or I will know what I can do to help. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

Using Facebook to communicate with his sister at home was helpful because it saved him money that he would have used to make calls. Through Facebook, it was also easy for him to advise his brother, who was in a different college:

Because of Facebook, I am able to chat with him regularly. I remind him to work hard and to avoid bad company at college…coz he gets into trouble and upsets my mom. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

Other than his family, Petero has a network of ‘very good friends’, who are like family. Some of these are very close childhood friends, former classmates at secondary school and current classmates. He said that they related well and were a good support for each other: Petero mentioned that with Facebook, ‘if something bad’ happened to him again, these friends would:

Post it on Facebook and help me fight…you know that time I did not know about Facebook but now am sure such friends will shout about it and the world will know and you know we can face anything together. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

Through Facebook, Petero could easily ask for help from his friends when he needed it:

With my condition sometimes it gets very painful to walk, very painful. And if I had not booked tuktuk in advance and I need something maybe from the shopping centre, I just group chat my friends on FB and you now guys are always online, so I tell them what stuff I need someone buys and just brings to my room. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

As a member of the Red Cross, Petero and his peers often organised events to support communities both within and outside campus. They found Facebook a good forum to update members:

Like last Saturday I told you we could not meet because we were going for a clean-up in the Market with the Red Cross members…the event was posted on
FB like two months ago, so we had been planning on FB because you see people are just busy right now. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

After such events, Petero liked posting pictures on his Facebook wall. He felt that posting pictures on Facebook or uploading videos of such events on YouTube was a good way of effecting change in society:

Sometimes we visit orphanages, or special schools that really need help. So in case we take a video and then post it on Facebook or YouTube it may open people’s eyes to know what is happening around them and may be they can also decide to visit such and help. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

Petero’s use of social media for looking forwards to the future

He uses Quora and LinkedIn to make connections with ‘experts’ in environmental science particularly ‘those who specialise in community conservation’ which he was more interested in:

You know you can tell who an expert is and in what area because, when you ask a question on Quora, you can follow to see who is answering, how many times they have answered other questions, what other people are saying about those answers, then you can even go and search their profile in LinkedIn and see. That’s how I have been connecting with such experts. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

He thought that these connections were good for his future aspirations:

I don’t know but I think they may know about employment opportunities or other opportunities that I am interested in like how to link my current degree with my passion which is architecture. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

As mentioned earlier, Petero sells stationery and computer accessories in campus. He said that he used Facebook to advertise his business; he also hoped that Facebook would continue being a freely available and accessible space to allow for more advertisings in the future as he continues to grow his business ideas. Moreover, he was hopeful that his growing network of Facebook friends was a ready market for his businesses.
Socially, Petero hopes that, through Facebook, his friends would still be within reach even when they were far away from each other and that their support for one another would not stop just because of their geographical distance:

Even now some of my friends are far but we still do things together, so I am sure that with FB we can always stand with each other… that is why I am saying it can still bring us together. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

6.3 Conclusion

In this section I have presented the participants separately to highlight their very different individual profiles and consequent lived experiences of social media use. The data in this section shows that YWD use social media in different aspects of their lives. Their activities on these media vary and are shaped by their prior experiences and both personal and contextual factors. Whilst what is observed in terms of their participation on social media may not appear to be very different from that of their non-disabled peers, for YWD, the significance and value attached to their activities on social media are different. Through the many activities they are involved in on these media, their experiences are expanded, which then enables them to make more informed choice.

In this way, they seem to move beyond their socially ascribed identity as YWD and the often-limited experiences that they have had to go through prior to attending University and having access to social media. They use social media to construct their own identity and the evidence shows that this identity is not limited to their disability. Each of the participants in this research actively sought an identity away from their disability. They see themselves as confident, having greater independence and empowered to contribute to society as illustrated in the various examples above.

With their new identities these youth are thus seen to take control of their lives in offline spaces and are enabled to begin to realise their aspirations which, previously, had seemed to be blocked by the attitudes and responses of others towards them as YWD. This is important in addressing the prejudices and assumptions that YWD are often faced with in offline spaces. The findings of this chapter provide a foundation for the next chapter where I will explore and develop these ideas to understand what is valued collectively and how this relates to their current and possible future lives beyond HE.
Chapter 7: Why YWD value social media in HE: Personal and Contextual factors

7.1 Introduction

This section builds on chapter 6, which has presented a detailed description of the lived experiences of social media use by the seven participants. The two key findings that have emerged from the data are, first, that YWD value a range of different things in their activities on social media and, second, that despite some of the existing social stigma with regards to disability (social identity), these youth have not allowed this to confine them. Through their agency/activities on social media, these youth are able to actualise new freedoms that enable them to shift some barriers and pursue valued goals in offline spaces. While some of the valued things are applicable to all YWD, others seem specific to some YWD. This chapter looks across the different experiences of these youth so as to make sense of why they value what is enabled through their activities on social media and how this relates to their current participation in HE and their future lives. This is reflected in the second research question, ‘How does activity on social media influence youth with disabilities’ awareness of present and future possibilities of ways of being in the world?’

Focusing on what these YWD value in their use of social media in HE is significant for this research for two main reasons. First, as observed in the introduction of this thesis and in the conceptual framing in chapter 4, this study acknowledges YWD as agents able to reflect on their valued ends which, as Sen (2009) argues, is key to understanding their individual wellbeing. The second reason, which is closely related to the first, is that these youth use social media in a particular way because of their past context in which they have lived (past experiences and opportunities) as well as their current context and its influences on their self-identity and the way in which they are perceived by others and their relationships with others. Understanding these influences on their identity is important because:

When someone thinks, and chooses and does something it is, for sure, that person and not someone else who is doing these things, but it would be hard to understand why and how he or she undertakes these activities without some comprehension of her social relations (Sen, 2009, p. 245).
Analysis of the seven participants’ data and why they value and use social media in particular ways (chapter 6) revealed that they are able to develop five capabilities (themes) namely: confidence, voice, social relations/networks, knowledge, independence and aspirations. In this section I discuss each of them, together with the conversion factors that enable/hinder their achievement. Where necessary I will use some of the photographs that were shared by the participants (see chapter 5) to elaborate further.

7.2 Capability of Confidence/self-worth

The capability of confidence is about being able to have a sense of self-worth (Mutanga & Walker, 2015). Across the data set, participants said that use of social media (Facebook and YouTube) had significantly helped enhance their confidence, which they highly valued for their participation as students in HE. Being confident was valued by these youth as many of them had faced social stigma and, as such, struggled with self-esteem issues outside of their families and former schools. This lack of self-confidence was more pronounced offline amongst the four youth with obvious physical impairments (two female and two males) and had initially affected the way they represented themselves online. Rukia’s case below exemplifies these challenges and its effects on her being online:

I was okay, but after form four it was not easy at first…Here or even just anywhere outside of our home…Also online…at the beginning no, I was not comfortable of revealing my whole picture on my Facebook profile. I don’t know, the wheelchair, me, what, what I don’t know…I just wanted my face to be there or anything else…maybe a representation of who I thought I was. I really struggled. (Rukia, PA, 2017)

Although Rukia had since managed to overcome her lack of confidence because of her activities on social media, she said it was not easy and it took time:

Okay, it did not just happen at once yaah…It took time and you know, I have so many friends and role models on FB who are disabled and I could see them posting their full pictures and I was like, aah…these guys are just so comfortable posting their pictures even with wheelchairs, mmm…why should I not do it? …I think I just gained courage from them…I realised that I was hiding who I was...It was just a lack of confidence. But you know, now I have
grown! I have embraced who I am and am comfortable with it. I post full pictures of me when I want to. (Rukia, PA 2017)

Because of her improved self-worth, Rukia found it easy to participate in other valued things (learning and social life) in campus. To illustrate the growth process of her capability to be confident and its importance in her life at university, Rukia took a photo of a plant (flower) as shown below:

![Photo showing Rukia’s perception of how social media usage has enhanced her confidence.](image)

Rukia sees herself as the green plant with the beautiful orange flowers. As can be seen, it is next to a brick wall and surrounded by concrete slabs, both of which she likened to the offline negative attitudes she had encountered. On the photo she also captured a hose pipe near the base of the flower, which she likened to her role models whose YouTube videos and Facebook posts keep ‘watering’ her to believe in herself:
Like Freda Mona, and the DIY lady I was telling you about...I think seeing their YouTube videos, photos and posts on FB has really boosted my image...Also my other role models, like Julie Gichuru, Larry Madowo...people whose postings can build me, people who are impacting society... It has grown like this flower, it was tiny but now it has grown including having beautiful flowers...I don’t shy away at (name of her university) like before. I work hard it doesn’t bother me anymore what people think. I am not in (...) to be accepted, that is not my main goal. I am here to get an education so if someone doesn’t accept me that is their problem...so like if we are having group work I participate fully, so if they were thinking I can’t or if they were having stereotypes I proof to them that you guys, I am smart. (Rukia, PA, 2017).

Similar observations were also made by the other participants, who noted that there were still many social constraints in their Universities, such as negative attitudes and structural barriers. These barriers are disempowering because they limit their desires to pursue valued goals and whilst the barriers are still there, social media offers an alternative path to pursue the things they value. They, too, attribute their capability to have a positive self-image to the influence of role models online:

But it doesn’t bother me now, not any more, you know this is who I am. Like on Facebook me I post my full photos...Do you know Nick? He is one of my role models...I love his YouTube videos, like I was watching one titled ‘no legs, no arms one, no worries’. He was saying that he doesn’t allow society to stop him.... And you know that has helped me to survive here in (university), you know here it is tough not like (a neighbouring university) ...these rich kids, their attitudes..., also the paths and sometimes lifts not working...but with such inspiration I remain focused, nowadays I have courage to face life. (Ken, LHI, 2017)

Yah, I think my confidence has improved a lot. Coz, like when I read their posts on FB, am like aii...they build me...people like Nick, have you seen his videos? You look, and you are like, what! That is where I want to be yah... not just sitting in fear because of people... Also, like Freda Monah her YouTube videos help me a lot... like you see she has a similar condition like me, I need

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26 Julie and Larry are renowned TV / media personalities and motivational speakers in Kenya. Both of them have told their stories in various fora about how they grew up in poverty.
to know how to stay healthy, how to take care of myself …such like things so that even when I am with people I don’t feel ashamed. (Neema, LHI, 2017)

Ken and Neema above were referring to Nick Vujicic a renowned Australian motivational speaker/preacher who uses a wheelchair. These youths’ online connections with him have helped enhance their self-image and, in turn, their identity both online and offline. This makes it possible for them to participate in life at HE with greater ease. Neema also mentions confidence arising from having what in her view is a ‘successful’ female role model with similar conditions to hers. Through her Facebook connection with the said role model, Neema gets helpful information on how to improve her hygiene and thus her ability to join others in campus without feeling ashamed. According to Sen (1995), being able to appear in public without shame is an important achievement in itself, particularly for marginalised groups such as YWD. These youths’ self-confidence has enhanced their identity and participation in HE. Moreover, exposure to these role models has helped shape their aspirations, as will be seen later in the chapter. Access to such role models was traditionally not possible for these youth as revealed by their previous educational experiences and home environment. This is an important aspect of their value for their activities on social media.

7.3 Voice Capability

All the youth acknowledged social media’s significance in amplifying their voice, which they highly regarded for enabling them to participate in life in HE effectively. From the data, the youth have exemplified their voice in various ways, either individually or collectively, in their capacity as family members or students in HE. Data shows that the capability to speak out for themselves was present earlier in life before their activities on social media; however, these interactions have played a significant role in developing this capability further. Being on social media provided them: i) access to more information to use in discussions/challenging discriminations and ii) opportunities to practise using their voice. At the family level, apart from Mtawala, all the other six participants noted that through social media (mainly WhatsApp) they were able to make contributions on family issues when they are not physically present at home as shown by Ben and Muthee:

We have a family WhatsApp group and that is where we engage. The frequent participants are my siblings and cousins, the guys I was talking about and
me...as a family we engage, we discuss family issues, we joke, we share a lot... (Ben, LHI, 2017).

You know, as a first born, I have a responsibility to care for them...So it is automatic I have a say. That’s how it is supposed to be in our place, I am involved in decision making. You know, after my mother it is me. (Muthee, SMM, 2017)

As students, voice was valued for helping them go through their educational journey successfully despite the existing barriers as shown in chapter 6. Individually, some of these youth had demonstrated their voice by challenging discriminations and prejudices within HE as in the case of Petero below:

Having our own voice is important especially for us people with disabilities otherwise we are doomed. I told you I wanted to study architecture, but they refused because of my hand. I felt very bad…I wish I knew a lot about FB those days. But I am happy that I had confidence to challenge the registrar. I faced him, I went to his office and asked to know why I was refused yet I had qualified… even if I am doing this environmental science now, I am the one who chose it; I refused what they were offering me. But I will still do what I wanted when I finish this degree. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

As illustrated above, Petero takes control of decisions about his own future and is proud of it. One of the pictures that he took to represent what social media meant to him shows him blowing a whistle:
But now with Facebook, things are even easier for us, you just go online and post., that is why you are seeing some of these changes…I can tell you that, if something like that happened again, you just need to raise it on Facebook and just like that you have mobilised comrades…That is why I felt that a whistle was a good way to represent social media. You whistle, and you get the attention of people far and wide. That is how we are changing things these days. (Petero, PA, 2017)

The illustration shows Petero’s view of why voice is important for YWD and how social media helps in strengthening it. Having a voice of their own (as students) enables these youth to speak about issues of value to them; it gives them courage to point out injustices and claim their rights where these have been infringed within, HE. Even though Petero’s desire to study architecture was denied, he is happy that his voice still prevailed in choosing his current course. In rejecting the registrar’s decision on what was deemed good for him, Petero affirmed his voice. Furthermore, he notes how Facebook makes it possible to amplify his voice against such injustices either individually or by inviting others
(comrades) to ‘whistle’ with him online with the hope that the perpetrators (registrar) would then be stopped.

Collective voice was also demonstrated in the way these youth took an active role in elective posts to represent their own interests in the university both in offline and online spaces. During the first phase of the data collection, only one YWD was in student leadership but when I returned for the follow-up eight months later, two more (Rukia and Ben) had also been elected in their respective universities. All three noted that they had used their presence both on closed Facebook groups for student with disabilities and on the larger University students’ Facebook groups and other commonly shared WhatsApp groups to campaign, as shown by Mtawala below:

I told you I am the ears, eyes and mouth of my peers with disabilities in the Student Association and in the University Council. I make sure that our issues are attended to. When I am there, I speak for all of us - that is why they elected me…Also, you know this FB is another important voice of ours here in (…), we can’t go to (…) Road to throw stones, this Facebook is our (…) road, ndio sauti ya mnyonge [this Facebook is an important voice of the marginalized]. So, I always encourage my fellow comrades not to keep silent…Through this FB we share our views about what is happening here. If there is something wrong that is affecting any of us, I just talk with the big people first but if they refuse to act, then we can shout on FB you know there nobody will shut you down. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017)

As Mtawala observes, having access to collective voice is essential for YWD in HE in Kenya, where, as shown here and elsewhere in chapter two, those in leadership positions tend to constrain them. Facebook provides a crucial space for them to collectively act as activists through their own Facebook groups to pursue what they collectively value in offline spaces within HE. Mtawala’s analogy of comparing their posts on Facebook to the act of throwing stones shows that they value it as being powerful/effective in expressing their voice in the same way as the violent mass protests that their non-disabled peers often use to voice their grievances in HE. Furthermore, in using Facebook, Mtawala felt assured that their voice would not be silenced as is often the case in offline spaces. Facebook enhanced their ability to mobilise their non-disabled peers easily when need be, especially when challenging ‘big people’ (senior/authoritative University staff as demonstrated earlier in Petero’s case). This also shows us that in online spaces everyone is ‘equal’ in terms of
ability to post things, as opposed to offline spaces, where there is too much ‘political’ interference and opportunity to be silenced.

Gender voice was also evident in the data. This was seen as a voice meant to speak back and confront both disability and gender prejudices and harassment from others, mostly non-disabled men. Such a voice is helpful for marginalised female YWD in making informed and autonomous decisions in fundamental issues like love and marriage as exemplified by Rukia:

And me, you know me eish! I blasted him. I gave him a piece of my mind, in fact I asked him which bush he had been living in. I was very angry, I mean people with disabilities are people like others and have all these needs. But also, I was like, we shouldn’t even be talking about sex me and you right? I mean, why are we talking about sex? What has sex got to do with a friendship? We had only been chatting for a few months on Facebook, we had not even met face to face and then he asks such a question. That tells me he was not interested in a relationship he was only after sex... if he is a sharp guy he got it! And maybe he may even enlighten his clique of friends, those who reason like him, those who think women are just for sex yah. (Rukia, LHI, 2017)

A powerful voice empowers YWD, especially those like Rukia who may face ‘double discrimination’ (being female and disabled), to be assertive and speak back to men who show a lack of respect to women and see them only as important for their sexual gratifications as is common in some communities in Kenya (Mugo et al. 2010). This may help fracture the cycle of adaptive preferences that would make these vulnerable YWD settle for less or completely lose hope in such matters (Walker, 2007).

Overall, the capability of an individual to express their thoughts/opinions/views and make them count on issues of importance to their lives is crucial for marginalised YWD (Mutanga & Walker, 2015). By making their voice count either individually or mobilizing collectively as shown above, these youth are exercising their agency, which is vital for shaping the type of lives that they deem valuable. Here we see how voice, as a capability, is necessary for strengthening their agency to act and the various ways in which social media supports in the realization of the same. The illustrations have also shown that voice reinforces the capability to be confident and vice-versa.
Hence, these youth are able to challenge the unfreedoms that make it hard for them to pursue the opportunities that would support them to actualise their goals within HE and later in adulthood. Studies on disability and social media show that, increasingly, many PWD are using social media (blogs, Facebook and Twitter) to advocate for access to offline public spaces and essential infrastructure (e.g. Ellis & Kent, 2017). Besides being a source of information (e.g. about rights), social media has the potency to attract wider audience such as human rights lobby groups, who are able to challenge governments and other institutions (such as HE); this has led to significant changes in the lives of PWD (Ellis & Kent, 2017). This is particularly important in the context of Kenya where, as shown in chapter 2 and 6, the rights of YWD continue to be infringed, despite the existing law and policy. The value of voice as a capability in itself has been acknowledged in many studies on marginalised groups both in online and offline spaces (e.g. Ellis & Kent, 2017; Mutanga & Walker, 2015; Walker & Mkwanazi, 2015a; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Having a voice to express oneself and speak in public without fear also goes together with the expansion of other valuable freedoms such as freedom to be educated, all of which are essential aspects of an individual’s agency (Alkire, 2009; Sen, 1999).

7.4 Capability to Belong /Social relations and networks

As shown in chapter 5 (figure 5.12 & 5.13), one of the tools that I used to collect data was a social media map. Through the map, I sought to know the people, networks and institutions that were important to the participants, particularly those with whom they connected using social media. The proximity of any of these relations to the participants indicated the strength of the relationships (see figure 5.12). Data showed that family, friends, former teachers, and other social networks/associations were valued. Participants drew on these relationships variedly for their participation in HE. Through these relations, participants had received personal and academic support, while other relations were seen as valued connections to keep in touch with ‘home’. Facebook, WhatsApp and Skype were popular for ensuring these connections. I discuss each of these relationships and the value that the youth attach to each of them.

7.4.1 Family

Apart from one participant, all the other six youth observed that their families were significant in their lives and contributed to their being in HE in various ways. Family provided these youth with a sense of belonging and identity.
Whilst the identity of these youth was built up of many factors, belonging to family was one of the significant aspects that defined them. Being able to belong and identify with their family is crucial for these youth because, as shown in chapter 2, disability related stigma is still rampant in many parts of Kenya. Thus, they valued social media’s ability to connect with their families, allowing continuous close interactions despite their geographical barriers. This was particularly important for these youth, for whom such possibilities were previously limited because of the types of schools they attended and the financial constrains in families to facilitate visits in the schools:

WhatsApp has really helped in that sense. You know my family are the most important people for me...We have a family WhatsApp group and that is where we engage. The frequent participants are me, my siblings and cousins, these are the guys I was talking about...So, as a family we engage, this helps to keep the family together…we talk about family issues, we joke, tell secrets, you know, as if we are together…we share our burdens and views about life, just anything…Also, my parents are not on WhatsApp, I rely on the group to know how they are doing or pass information like information on things I need to sustain myself here in the university…such things. (Ben, SMM, 2017)

My family gives me a sense of belonging. It is where I will not be judged, it’s where I will air my needs and they will be met without feeling like my disability is a burden to anyone. Yah…It’s where we have that you know…strong bond. Family is the first place I run to if I have any good news or a problem…It is my sister and my brother they have WhatsApp and FB…they also tell me if all is well at home. (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

Ben and Rukia’s examples highlight what they value about being with their families; they talk about family issues, joke, share secrets and burdens with one another freely. Families provided the youth a safe place to be without feeling discriminated; it was the first place they ran to with ‘good or bad news’. Furthermore, families provided for their needs in a ‘normal’ way that is, without being viewed as a ‘burden’. Having such a sense of belonging and worth is fundamental for these youths’ wellbeing. It reinforces their value and thus helps them build a positive identity, which is critical, especially in the face of discriminatory attitudes and structures as observed earlier in this chapter and in chapter 2 and 6.
As noted by Ben, communication between him and the family was reciprocal, ‘we engage with each other’. Unsurprisingly, much of their communications with family was mainly facilitated by siblings and cousins who were on social media. Unlike most in their parents’ generation, these young relatives had received formal education and could easily identify with social media. They also knew how to negotiate around the various network providers to access the most affordable bundles for connecting online, hence ensuring communication with the participants who were away in HE. However, some families, like Mtawala’s, perpetuated the very negative experiences that YWD are faced with in the larger social context. This made him feel unwanted and thus refuse any contact with them as detailed in his profile in chapter 6. Despite having access to free Wi-Fi like all the other youth, Mtawala had chosen not to communicate with the family, thus exercising his agency in this way. Instead, he preferred to link with childhood friends in his home area, comrades at HE and student associations; this is where he felt valued.

7.4.2 Friends

Besides family, the youth identified with friends both within HE and elsewhere. ‘Friends’ were generally defined as: childhood friends, former classmates, former teachers, current classmates, friends from church and other new friends. Data reveals that Facebook, WhatsApp and Skype were important spaces for finding and maintaining friendships for these youth. But for some new friends, participants noted that many of the other friendships had principally started offline and later on moved online. Data also shows that for some of these youth, starting and maintaining genuine friendships offline and online was not easy. Nonetheless, the additional layer of belonging and the sharing that came with the friendships were valued:

You see, friends are important. No man is an island, all of us need friends. People we can share our lives with, like here you know we are all students we need friends to study with…but not just for studies, friends are people you can WhatsApp anytime to talk, to laugh with or share a problem, such like…people you can identify with yah..., people who you will reach out for help or whom you can help also...you know it is not just being helped I can also help…people who value you for who you are. (Neema, SMM, 2017)

Neema highlights the valued aspects of friendship that were commonly shared by all the participants.
Friends were necessary as study mates, people to share the joys and challenges of life with and for belonging with. Most importantly, as Neema comments, participants said that they preferred friends who value you ‘for who you are’. That is, friendships based on their common identities as a fellow youth, student, colleague or young woman rather than their physical characteristics. In such friendships the youth felt appreciated as equals. But this was not always the case. In the private university, the two participants (Rukia and Ken) said that except for a few friends, they had experienced rampant negative attitudes even from classmates with whom they had hoped to form friendships:

Okay, let me say it is not easy to form friendships here. I wouldn’t say it is easy like in other places where you meet and within a few days you are friends. Here these rich kids are not friendly… Here, people get hold of you because they know they are going to benefit from you in class, when they see like you are not badly off like them as in you can answer questions, that is when they develop interest in you and ask for your WhatsApp…it is just the way things happen here, so you have to be very wise. That is why I told you that I only have just a few genuine friends here. (Rukia, LHI, 2017)

Social interactions here err…it is difficult mostly because of class issues. They find it very difficult to socialise with other people like me…you start feeling strange, Like, you are out of place… but when they see you answering questions in the WhatsApp group they now become interested. (Ken, LHI, 2017)

It is interesting to note how the attitudes of these classmates changed when they realised that these two were academically able. In such an environment, Ken and Rukia observed the need to be ‘wise’. Faced with these challenges, the two had few non-disabled friends and preferred to keep company of the few other YWD in their campus. Additionally, they used their existing online friends to extend their friendship base. Besides studying together, friends at HE were valued as crucial links to opportunities such as scholarships, business ideas and other helpful information related to the youths’ wellbeing:

Friends are very important here in campus…but you know, our relationship is more than just what we do in class that is why I was telling you this WhatsApp is good. Like we have a WhatsApp group where we do many things together…Like the software I told you…it is just one of our friends here, he is
also blind like me, he is the one who told us how to crack it…he shared it in our WhatsApp group. That is an important friend, you know without that software it would be very hard…such a friend is very helpful. (Ben, LHI, 2017)

For some like Mtawala, friends were more valued than family. As his data shows in chapter 6, Mtawala was the only one amongst the seven participants who had felt let down by his family. However, when he joined boarding school, he made good friends whom he values for their friendships and for support he received from them. His view about their friendship is illustrated in figure 7.2 and the accompanying quote:

Figure 7.3. Mtawala’s photo of his view about the value of friendships as an important bridge
To me I can say that friends are very valuable. Even in school I survived many things because of friends not family…Our bond is still very strong even today that is why I have taken that picture, do you see that joint, it is like a bridge right? Friends can help you cross many places. I am a leader today because of the support of such friends and others I have met here …but FB was one forum that really helped spread word to my friends that I was vying. I had my poster and agenda on my wall and I invited my friends to like and requested for their votes. I also asked them to sell me to their friends, they campaigned for me very well…that contributed heavily to my being elected. (Mtawala, SMM, 2017)

These examples illustrate some of the ways that they were supported by their friends through social media. Ben appreciates that without the friend’s input on how to ‘crack’ the software, it would be challenging for him to access social media. For Mtawala, the capability to be able to be in friendships was an integral part of his life. In spite of his negative experiences from his family, friends were there for him while he was growing up and had also supported his leadership endeavours. Friends used Facebook to campaign for him to gain his current position, which he highly regarded.

Although there were only two female participants, there is a clear distinction between these two and their male counterparts with regards to some of the valued aspects of friendships and why social media was helpful in this regard. Rukia and Neema strongly felt the need to have close female friends whom they could identify with as they negotiated through young womanhood:

Friends to grow together with. You know..., now we are in this stage of University, after this, it will reach a time when we will start thinking of relationships, getting married, you know, a lot of stuff you want to share..., so these are close friends who we share such things on WhatsApp, we laugh together, cry, friends I can WhatsApp anytime, friends who will listen to your nonsense…I don’t know whether I am making sense with that. (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

You see, like many of my friends from high school we are that age of young women…you know we are still very intact, we have a Facebook group where we share girl stuff, and you see some know more so I can learn from
them…also other female friends who have disability like me are important because we can talk about our common things…they are very important.
(Neema, PA, 2017)

Whilst the two of them hoped to start relationships that would lead to marriage after HE, they had fears that this might not happen for what they termed as societal prejudices against women with disabilities. Hence belonging to friendships with girlfriends who could identify with their emotional issues was crucial. Both of them were in WhatsApp and Facebook groups with these valued friends. I discuss the issue of love and marriage later in the section on aspirations.

For others like Muthee whose family did not have access to a smartphone or social media, having a network of some of his childhood friends still living close to his home provided a significant link to his family. As a first-born son who felt responsible for his family, Muthee relied on these friends to check on his family when he was away in HE. Many of these friends did not further their education beyond secondary school and hence mostly lived at home. Besides helping him stay connected with his family, Muthee valued these friends for the ‘stuff’ they did together while at home and, hence, did not want to break this bond:

Like I told you earlier these friends are the ones who tell me how my family is doing, I told you I am the first born so I need to know if everything is okay…Also, when I go for holidays these are the closest people who I socialise with a lot you know, we do stuff together there in the village…so I want to be in touch yah… you don’t want to be a stranger every time you go back home…and with this WhatsApp you have no excuse. (Muthee, SMM, 2017)

Muthee credits WhatsApp for ensuring that he is no longer ‘a stranger’ every time he goes back home. His value for friendship in this way is highly related to his previous schooling experiences. Because of the long distance between his high school and his home (see chapter 6), coupled with a lack of financial resources, Muthee rarely went home for holidays and was not happy about it. He had felt detached from important support systems. With WhatsApp, it was now possible for him to stay connected to family and these friends, with the hope that once he went back, he would easily fit with them in the real-world without feeling like a stranger. In this sense, WhatsApp had provided him a significant
capability to support his desire for continuous communication and friendships. Such options were not available for him before.

Despite social media’s ability to enhance the capability to connect with friends, some participants felt that the media was not a very trusted space to initiate genuine friendships. For such youth, offline connections were crucial in determining the possibilities of extending friendships online:

I mostly connect with people that I know, like friends who I went to school with, comrades here or at other universities or other friends whom I have met personally. It is very rare for me to befriend someone online, I must meet someone first before I can add them as friends…even before FB that was my rule, I don’t just befriend anyone easily. You have to know people’s motives…I believe that FB should be used for the right purpose, not just to talk to anybody whom I don’t know and have not met, no way. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017)

I am very selective, it depends if I have met you face to face but even then, I can consider many things, you can’t just interact with anyone on Facebook…okay it has not happened to me but because of my other experiences a long time ago, I just don’t accept Facebook friendships like that. Without knowing you? I will not. (Neema, LHI, 2017)

Since then, I am now very careful especially with men. I just don’t chat with online friends whom I have not known previously, I mean outside social media. Some of these so-called friends whom I have not met nowadays am even just blocking them. (Rukia, SMM, 2017)

Mtawala and Neema’s caution against initiating/accepting online friendships without prior offline connections arises from their offline cultural experiences growing up with disability especially with regards to issues associated with witchcraft. On the other hand, Rukia’s fears emanate from her previous negative online experience. Research on social media shows that such fears are not uncommon with other youth, many of whom are said to be generally more unsafe online compared to adult users (e.g. Marwick & boyd, 2014; Hargittai & Marwick, 2016). Moreover, some participants observed that sometimes social media did not provide the full benefits that are possible for friends to enjoy together in the real-world:
People do a lot of stuff in main campus and all my friends from class are there. Like they have a bash, birthday parties, things like that…Like I told you, in our class it is just me and my friend (...) living here, I can say it is very helpful for us but you know, we have also missed out on many things over there, so we just enjoy them on WhatsApp or FB when they send pictures or when guys post…but it is not like the real stuff you know. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

Yah of course I have many friends here, but they live in other hostels. But I can’t go to their places because you know many are upstairs so mostly, they come to my place…but you know I also want to visit them...Yes I can say WhatsApp and Facebook helps but also it can’t help completely so that is one problem I have. (Neema, SMM, 2017)

Muthee and Neema noted that they often missed out on the ‘real stuff’ that was enjoyed by their friends in offline spaces. Although they appreciated the disability services that had provided for their current accommodation, these are the same ones that restricted them from enjoying some of their valued freedoms like visiting with friends. Moreover, even with Facebook and WhatsApp they still missed out on the real-world experiences. They would have wanted to be physically present in these parties. Rukia and Ben also shared similar observations. This reveals the relationship between their individual conversion factors and other factors in their environment in HE and to the larger context in society. Thus, despite the capabilities offered by social media, traditional barriers are still present and limit their desire for full participation in valued ways. This confirms observations from international literature which argue that despite the current technological advances, offline social inequalities are often duplicated in online spaces (Livingstone & Helsper, 2007; Roy & Lewthwaite, 2016).

7.4.3 Former high school teachers

All the youth cited some of their former high school teachers as significant social supports. These teachers had believed in these youth and encouraged them to work hard and pursue their dreams. Most youth identified such teachers as their first role models/mentors and people with whom they continued connecting via social media:

But you know he was very different…actually I can say he is the one who helped me a lot in my secondary education. Even now he is like my mentor; we have become very good friends. You know he even took me to (name of
school) in his car; he also gave me some money to buy the things that I needed for boarding. It is because of him that I agreed to join (school)... nowadays we communicate with WhatsApp, he treats me with respect. During holidays he gives me tuition jobs at the school...sometimes he asks his friends at KARI for me so I am able to get some pocket money that way. (Petero, SMM, 2017)

I went and talked to my Kiswahili teacher, she was very close, she was like a mentor to me I looked up to her, her name was Mrs. Makori. She was very different from others and supportive I must say. Even when the new administration refused to listen to us, we always went to her, she was like our advocate...even now when she comes to Nairobi, she always WhatsApps me sometimes just to check on me, she is proud of me, nowadays she jokes and says that I will be her lawyer... that is one teacher who really supported us. (Ben, LHI, 2017).

Those two teachers were very good...We WhatsApp a lot. They send inspirational quotes and I also send them some. You know they treat me with respect just like one of them. Now they invite me as a guest speaker. I feel honoured when I am invited to speak to candidates...just giving them tips on how to handle the exams. (Muthee, SMM, 2017).

Besides encouraging them, some of these teachers had supported the youth in various ways including fundraising for them and connecting them with NGOs for funding in HE. The youth often mentioned that these teachers treated them with respect and, for these reasons, they valued their friendships. As exemplified here, through social media, the youth have been able to maintain these connections.

7.4.4 Other social networks

In addition, all the youth belonged to, and valued their membership of, other social networks both offline and online. Apart from the small study groups mentioned earlier, the youth were also organised in other WhatsApp and Facebook groups which were often closed and limited to peers with similar impairments with whom they had common experiences. The groups were said to be significant spaces for sharing valued survival tips needed to participate in life, as observed by Ben:
That is why I told you these groups are powerful resources, like the WhatsApp group I told you, we share so many things but because some are sensitive like the software stuff, it is just us who are visually impaired and you must be known by a member to be admitted…it is risky but that is the only way we survive here…so far, only one person has ever been caught so we have to be very careful. (Ben, SMM, 2017).

They also belonged to their respective student associations and the youth in public universities were also members of their Students with Disabilities Associations. Data reveals that they were actively engaged in these groups both offline and online through WhatsApp and Facebook. These groups provided important platforms for the youth to share their views on valued issues in campus with their comrades; this enhanced their voices both individually and collectively. Additionally, as observed by Mtawala and reported previously, due to their limited numbers in HE, YWD valued their membership of the larger student associations, which were seen as critical solidarity groups whenever YWD needed to mobilise others for support to address any social injustices either with the university administration or in other contexts outside HE.

All of them also had strong affiliations to religious groups within and outside of campus both offline and online. Within the university, they participated either with the Christian Union or the Young Christian Students, while outside of the campus their affiliations were mostly with religious based NGOs that advocated for their rights and well-being:

You can see St Martin’s here…It is a Catholic NGO that sponsors my education…The program manager and some volunteers from the organisation went to the school and demanded that I be admitted, that it was my right…you know they had even invited the press…they wanted to sue the school so the principal was afraid. She just allowed me in…with them we mostly communicate on WhatsApp but for official things they email…The church Facebook group is good for spiritual nourishment and also a good support group…like someone is concerned, they want to know how one is doing. (Neema, SMM, 2017)

Through these religious affiliations, some youth received emotional and financial support needed for their being in HE. As detailed in the participants’ profiles in chapter 6, some had received financial support from these organisations since high school.
youth also drew support from various DPOs mostly offline. Generally, this involved mentorship and sensitization on policy issues. Social media enables the youth to maintain their social relationships with these groups.

Data in this section shows that social media provides significant opportunities to develop YWD’s capabilities and functionings for social relations in HE. Being able to belong to the various groups is important, particularly for YWD in the context of Kenya, where disability related discrimination is still widespread. The diverse social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Skype and YouTube) that are easily accessible to these youth provides them with choice, which is crucial in helping them decide which platform to use when connecting with the various social relations identified. YWD valuing of choice with regards to access and use of social media and other online technologies has also been observed in studies on YWD in the Global North (e.g. Söderström, 2009, 2014). Availability of options enhances their freedom to communicate in valued ways, as observed by Ben, ‘I have the others, but I prefer WhatsApp because it is more popular with my friends and family.’ The capability for choice has traditionally not been available for these YWD, yet it is essential for developing their agency and well-being and helps disrupt the cycle of adapted preferences that YWD are frequently faced with (Sen, 1999, 2004).

The more options these youth have the better for them in terms of reducing their deprivations (Sen, 1999). As shown here, their improved well-being is not only limited to the instrumental value of choice that is now available to these youth - that is, being able to access a wide range of social media platforms - but also intrinsically significant because of the freedom to choose freely, both of which are “directly conducive to well-being” (Sen, 1992, p.50). This has a significant influence on their ability to belong with others. Research on youth and social media shows that in networking with each other, the ability of being in the same online space as one’s offline pre-existing friends is crucial in ensuring they do not feel left out (boyd, 2007; Stirling, 2014).

The youth also value social media because of its ability to break geographical barriers that have previously restricted their freedom for close interactions with these valued social relations who provide them with a sense of love, belonging and identity. As shown in chapter 6, all of them attended boarding schools away from family and were not visited regularly. Some, like Muthee, often remained at school even during school holidays because of the long distances and a lack of financial resources to pay for the bus ticket
back home. Being away from his family made him unhappy and he felt like a stranger whenever he went back home.

Hence, social media’s ability to keep these youth connected with their family despite the distances enhances their ability to continue building and enhancing their family bond. This is significant for their emotional well-being and influences their capability to participate effectively in life at HE. Studies in the capability approach argue that the conditions, choices and capabilities of a young person’s social relations/home environment are influential in shaping his/her capabilities and in turn, their ability to convert these capabilities into functionings in later years (Biggeri et al., 2006a; Sen, 1999), such as being able to participate in HE as shown here. The role of family in promoting YWD wellbeing freedom has been observed in various research in Kenya (Gathoni, 2014; Ingstad & Grut, 2007 and Opini, 2012). In these studies, many families emerge as central supports that mobilise their often very limited resources to ensure that these youth access formal education and are provided for.

Other social relations – as with friends and well-wishers - also help in supporting the personal well-being of these youth. Data shows that these youth have helpful friendships both individually and collectively through membership of various valued social networks both offline and online. Being able to identify with these social relations is crucial; it gives them a sense of belonging and identity and helps them to cope better with life at HE. For example, although Mtawala was deprived of family love while growing up, data shows that through his offline and online connections with childhood friendships, education sponsors and fellow YWD at HE, he has had the confidence to pursue and participate in those things which are seen as valuable in HE and with which he wishes to be involved - such as being a student leader, which is a significant achievement for him. This resonates with other studies which show that where a student is deprived of family support, the assistance received from fellow students and well-wishers is crucial in enabling him/her to persevere with their studies and other social activities in HE (Mutanga, 2015; Skinner, 2004).

Furthermore, Reich (2010) argues that through online membership, youth can deepen their relationships and gain enhanced social support. As shown here, social media’s role in enlarging the social relations and networks of these youth reveals a range of related social opportunities. These capabilities are helpful for assessing how well these YWD are doing in developing their individual agency and wellbeing in and through HE. Through some of
these social networks the youths’ capability of knowledge, independence and aspirations have been significantly enhanced.

### 7.5 Capability of Knowledge

Participants valued social media as a source of useful information/materials, which was seen as crucial for enabling knowledge construction for academic participation in HE and for pursuing future pathways. Most of the youth said that there was much information from social media that would inform their study areas. Ken and Petero were amongst those who strongly believed that social media was helpful in this way. These two had subscribed to academic social media platforms (Academia, Quora, and Research Gate), which they thought were for ‘serious academics’, and used them extensively to search for study materials in their subject areas. They frequently visited these three platforms, and LinkedIn where they also had accounts, and followed people who they viewed as ‘experts’ in their subject areas:

Also, do you know Quora? I use it a lot but that is for serious academic stuff, not like these others like FB. I go there to get things for my research, assignments yah... You just ask a question and you get various answers from people...But the good thing with Quora, the people who respond are professionals in those areas which you are asking. So, the answers you get are always almost correct or related to what you could be looking for. (Ken, LHI, 2017)

It is very helpful for me; I get a lot of my IT stuff there. Like you know you are given some heavy stuff assignments, stuff that you have not done that is where to go...so I became a regular and I started asking questions and people even from the States would get back to me with suggestions on what books to read things like that. So, I started following them even on Twitter, then I opened a LinkedIn account looked up their names yeah...so, I am now friends with more IT experts here and even outside of the country. (Ken, SMM, 2017)

We were given an assignment I could not manage to do it... There was nothing even in the main library then I went on Google, I searched and searched then I saw an answer and it led me to Quora where someone had posted... I just saw the books he said he had read. But the books were not in
our library, so I chatted with him online and he sent me another link and I got the books, and from then, I liked Quora... When we got our assignments marks I was the best, even the lecturer congratulated me, that is when I trusted it completely so I use it for my studies. (Petero, LHI, 2017).

Ken and Petero attached specific value to these social media, which were different from others like Facebook; they were significant resources for their academic participation in HE. In their view, having access to these platforms had helped them excel in their subject areas, won them praise from their lecturers and respect from their peers, all of which they regarded highly. In turn this had boosted their confidence to participate in class discussions and other social activities in campus. Their social media diaries show that they spent most of their time on these sites reading and researching. Likewise, Muthee and Ben viewed social media, particularly YouTube, as having good simulation videos related to their studies in law. As an International Relations student, Rukia found Facebook and Twitter helpful with current affairs which helped her to prepare for classes. In this way she felt that she was not ‘left behind’:

For example, now I am doing International Relations right, like today I saw on FB that Trump is going to visit China yah... so, I read about it and what other people have commented. Then when I went to class, I just asked my coursemates, did you see that Trump is going to China? What do you think? And we just exchanged our thoughts... So, I am not left behind, I am up to date. (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

However, for some participants like Neema, social media was viewed as, ‘only good for general things in life but for my studies no I don’t think it is very reliable’. For this reason, she rarely used social media as a resource for her study activities in campus. Similar views were also shared by Mtawala, who thought that social media was a good source of knowledge on other topics of interest to him but not necessarily for his study area:

You know I don’t think social media is a serious place to get information for classwork, maybe on Google yes but not on Facebook. But I can say I get information for various things that help build me as a leader. Like when I watch YouTube videos about how they are conducting debates, the way they throw jabs at each other such things I get such knowledge and skills there. (Mtawala, LHI, 2017).
Besides being a source of resources for use in their academic life at HE, the youth valued social media as providing linkages to professional networks. Their ideas and value for social media changed with time as they actualized the various beings and doings.

Through their activities on Quora, they learned about professional networks such as LinkedIn which they did not know before. Increased visibility online led to increase in offline visibility as they got to meet with some of the people within their individual professional networks. This is helpful in joining professional communities post HE. Through these networks, the youth enhance their ability for possible employment referrals, which makes it easier for them to pursue their aspirations despite the existing barriers. For example, when I went back for feedback with participants in December 2017, Ken and Petero had joined LinkedIn after they learned about it through their activities on Quora. Both of them had met some of the ‘experts’ in their respective areas of study during events hosted in their universities and in the city. Rukia’s engagement on Twitter and Facebook had increased after being elected as a student representative and securing an internship opportunity with one of the TV stations.

Likewise, through some of their contacts with their law networks, Ben and Muthee had established offline relationships with possible mentors, with whom they often communicated via Skype and WhatsApp:

Like me and Samuel, being my mentor, we’ve had several talks about life…I think they’ve helped me a lot because this is a person who is qualified in the area that I am training in. Also, he has experiences in life with visual impairment, so he is able to advise me, on how to go about work related matters which may bring difficulty in future. Having such knowledge helps me, I am getting ready for these things slowly. And you know he is currently in the UK, but we still talk via Skype. That is why I said social media is helpful in such ways, it wouldn’t be easy for me. (Ben, SMM, 2017)

We keep in touch mostly through WhatsApp. Because they are working at least they give me a picture of their working environments, what they do and things like that. It helps me to know what I can expect when I am done with school. Many times, it is me who asks them how work life is…why I ask is because I want to prepare myself to the world of work. So that I know what to expect, you know, there are those attitudes needed in a job. Those are
important. Those general attitudes of helping you get and keep a job.’ (Muthee, SMM, 2017)

In using social media to link with these professional associations and mentors, Ben and Muthee were forward thinking about life after HE. As observed, their concerns about learning how to get and maintain a job relate to their visual impairments, hence their need to learn from mentors who had experiences in the same. As Ben observes, having this knowledge would help him know how to handle any ‘work related matters which may bring difficulty in future.’

Illustrations in this section reveal that participants value social media as a source of information which is contributing to their capability of knowledge, which was highly valued both in itself and for the possibilities that it would open for them after HE. Their awareness of social media as a source of knowledge was highly influenced by their study areas and individual experiences. In turn, this impacted on their functionings as students - that is, being able to participate in studies effectively as desired. For example, as an IT student, Ken spent most of his time online, where he got exposed to the various possibilities offered by social media in terms of information for his studies. Through the knowledge gained from one social media platform (Quora) he was agentic in reaching out to experts in his field, who then referred him to other resources online, where he found further materials which helped him do his assignments and excel. This boosted his confidence and, in turn, his agency to continue reading and researching; he thus gained admiration even from peers who had initially looked down upon him. According to Kabeer (1999), the ability to make such strategic life choices has a profound effect on an individual and can be viewed as a process of empowerment. Moreover, having exposure to such options (materials and professional networks) is said to widen their ‘aspiration window’ and shape their awareness of available opportunities relevant to them (Mkwananzi, 2017, p. 185).

Although the youth were still in HE, their desire to get information in line with their studies was helpful in shaping their aspirations. By joining professional associations and seeking mentors, Muthee and Ben said they got helpful information necessary in their preparation for life after HE. This is significant for personal development and decision making; as the two mention, this information will help them know how to handle work related issues which may cause difficulty for them in future. Such awareness and exposure is important as it shows that these youth are abreast with the realities in the job market.
These are important capabilities as they help build their confidence and outlook towards the future, which is essential for YWD, especially in a country where negative societal attitudes towards disability are still significantly evident. Robeyns (2005) argues that being knowledgeable in this way is a valuable capability that helps expand other capabilities and improve their agency and, in turn, their lives (Sen, 1999).

7.6 Capability of Independence and aspirations

Despite the diverse experiences of marginalisation, the optimism in these youths’ attitude was palpable. They wanted to be socially and economically independent. They all had goals and were committed towards a better future trajectory not only for themselves but also for their families and fellow YWD. In many ways, these youth view themselves as providers - not receivers, as society would view them. Data shows that the desire for independence and aspirations were some of the key reasons why these youth valued their being on social media. Frequently, they linked their desire for independence with their aspirations - hence the reason for combining the two in this section. For example, while Ben valued the support he received from family and friends with regards to his mobility, he noted that this had somehow reduced his ability to achieve individual independence and privacy which he needed as a young man:

You know, I am a young man now right? Independence is important to me in many ways...that means you don’t have to rely on other people to come and help you read your chats..., You know there could be relationships that I want to keep private and I want it to remain that way, so one thing I can say is that social media enhances my privacy. You are able to do your own things without limitations...that freedom is important. When you are independent this way, you are able to escape some of the repercussions of having to rely on others yah. (Ben, PI, 2017)

That is why I was telling you that social media...all the three but mostly WhatsApp has helped me to bond with people outside of my family in a manner I am not sure I could have done before. I can say that is a form of freedom that never existed for me. I don’t know how to explain it well, but it is a freedom I can tell you it is good, I love it. Doing your things without relying on other people all the time is good...it has really enhanced my independence that is why I prefer using it. (Ben, PI, 2017)
In two of his photos shown below, Ben likened social media to a highway and a wide-open gate (figures 7.3 & 7.4 below) which he used to illustrate the freedom to pursue the things he felt he had achieved since he started using social media. As his illustrations show, his use of ‘freedom’ here denotes both the instrumental value (as a means to an end) and the intrinsic value (as an end in itself) (Sen, 1992). As a highway (figure 7.3 below), social media opened his life to a world of possibilities that he was not privy to before. On the other hand, as a wide-open gate, social media had given him access to possibilities that were not easily accessible to him before because of the nature of his impairment. On various occasions, Ben mentioned how social media (WhatsApp, Facebook and Skype) had helped him achieve a certain ‘form of freedom’ to engage with his environment in a manner that would not have been possible even with support from his offline social relations. Furthermore, as a young man, Ben valued his privacy and wanted to do things without limitations. These comments were also observable in Muthee and Mtawala and can be linked to the nature of their impairments.
Ben also valued financial autonomy - that is, he wanted to have his own money and spend it as he desired. While he was happy with the financial support that he received from his parents, he felt that this was not his money. Furthermore, the money was inadequate for him to ‘enjoy a good life’ in campus as he wished:
If I am able to make an extra coin from not relying on others like my parents, like from father…that is money from outside you get me? Your life is in the hands of somebody. You want to emancipate yourself. I want independence in how to use … my money that is a good life... You know with this little pocket money you really have to restrain yourself, only the basics… Of course, you need to care so much because this is money that is coming from someone who has a lot of responsibilities. So many other people are depending on him, so you have to take that into consideration. (Ben, PI, 2017).

It is very hard, for some of us, we struggle a lot…that is why we are acting on this information to register a business. It was posted in our WhatsApp group, it will help us to apply for such opportunities that will make life easier. I have already registered mine, everything is online. We are targeting the 30% government tenders reserved for special groups including PWDs…I keep chicken and rabbits back at home...There is so much information on how to do such things on Facebook… I started it just to have something for income generation. But now it has become like a family venture. Since I am not at home my mum and younger brother are in charge. (Ben, LHI, 2017)

As can be seen, although Ben wanted financial freedom, it should not be interpreted as wanting to detach from his family. Rather, he felt that having his own money and control on the same was important. This need for financial independence and support for family resonates with comments from all the other participants. Interestingly, while they all hoped to get employment after graduating from HE, they felt the income would not be sufficient to live a comfortable life. Hence, like Ben, many of them were either involved in, or were in the process of starting, income-generating activities. The money-making initiatives were not just for gaining financial autonomy. As shown below, some of the youth often needed extra money for other health-related needs:

Yeah for me I want a good life I want to be independent. Like get a good job, have my own money so that people don’t just take you for granted, also I need to take a good diet because of my condition… I told you these rich kids are always partying and asking me to help them with assignments, I used to then I realised what! Actually, I will not donkey for them just like that, no way! That is when I decided that you know I will trade with them, that is how I earn some money here ...So I do the work they WhatsApp like asking but I tell them no
send the money first and after I just inbox them on FB or sometimes I email if it is a big file. (Ken, PI, 2017)

I now have a part-time job as a presenter with Sign TV…I co-host with others, it is a programme on disability, we interview many people but mostly those with disabilities who are successful so that we show the world that we are also out there building the nation…I got the job through a WhatsApp contact, so I just took my CV and the lady said she would call me then I just saw a WhatsApp message asking me to go…that gives me some money, you know the money that my sponsor gives is not enough for all my needs. (Rukia, LHI, 2017).

I am gifted, I have skills in business and with this social media, you just need to be creative, you can earn money easily. That is how I manage to survive here because you know I always need money to buy the medicine I use for pain…like if you know what comrades buy a lot like flashdisks, memory card, stationery such, you buy cheaply and come make a profit…I post on FB, they just come to my room…I try to be independent because my mother is too burdened and her job is just a causal one…so I should not depend on her now, so nowadays I buy my medicine, I also support them when I can. (Petero, SMD, 2017).

As illustrated above, these youths’ desire for a ‘good job’ and extra income to live an independent ‘good life’ relates to the two types of material disadvantages that many PWD often face as argued by Sen (2009), that is, conversion handicap and earning handicap (p. 258). The former makes it challenging for such youth to convert their income into a ‘good living’ because of their impairments. In this case, this would require them to have assistive technologies and a good diet and/or medication as shown by all the four above, to be able to achieve similar functionings (e.g. to participate in class) as their non-disabled peers. On the other hand, because of their impairments these youth may experience earning handicap because they may find it harder to get a job or to retain it and may receive lower wage for work compared to their non-disabled peers (Sen, 2009).

Besides their individual wellbeing, the youth had aspirations to use their experiences, knowledge and skills in giving back to society, especially to other PWD whom they felt
were still marginalised. Ben and Muthee wanted to use their knowledge of law as human rights activists to advocate for people with visual impairments as illustrated:

I believe I have a role to play in this life especially for my fellow visually impaired persons. Not just to be comfortable alone - we must lift others. (Muthee, LHI, 2017)

We use our knowledge to sensitize our colleagues …like students with disabilities in secondary schools, because many of them don’t know these things… like issues to do with affirmative action like the 5 percent rule that I was telling you about, such… (Ben, LHI, 2017)

In the same way, as a journalist, Rukia felt that she had an important platform to ‘sensitize the society about disability, like to fight for others.’ In particular, she felt that with social media she had better opportunities to ‘highlight the plight of so many people in the slums who undergo bad stuff, but the regular media doesn’t report these things.’ Petero said that if he made enough money, he would buy his family a piece of land in a better place and relocate them. He also wanted to extend support to others just as he himself had received:

I volunteer with the Kenya Red Cross but that is not enough. Like in the village there are many people who are suffering in silence like the way I suffered, and nobody is helping them. So, I can start like something even if just for counselling them...you know I was really helped by the Principal I told you. I can also help like that...Just open a Facebook account for addressing such issues and helping people know where to go for further help or just connecting them online. (Petero, LHI, 2017)

Neema too wanted to help others but her approach was different. She strongly felt that the attitudes of most teachers in ‘big schools’ towards disability needed to be changed and she could play a significant role in this by working there and using Facebook where need be to highlight any injustices:

I even refused to do special needs education because of that, I want to go and teach in a normal school. Who said that I can only teach in a special school? That is why I said no. I am doing general subjects not special education…If I go to a normal school, I will change that school’s attitudes towards disability. We need to change the schools especially these big schools like nationals, the principals
wah!... So at least I will make a change in such a school…and you know now with this Facebook if I see bad things I will just post for the world to know. (Neema, LHI, 2017)

What was very clear from each of these youths’ aspirations to effect change in society is that they all seemed to relate it to their past experiences of social injustices. Neema’s determination to go and work in a regular school arose from her own experience of almost missing out on her choice high school but for the intervention of the NGO that funds her education. She hopes that, by teaching in these top-performing schools, she might support by highlighting the prevailing subtle prejudices that often go unreported, as most students with disabilities continue being knowingly excluded, despite meeting the required qualifications to join such top schools, as shown in chapter 2 and 6.

Other aspirations relate to being able to marry and start families of their own. Although all of them had aspirations for this, gender differences were clearly observable when they shared their views about possibilities of finding the right partners. All the five male youth were very optimistic of settling down after graduating and finding employment. However, they did not believe that social media was an ideal place to find the right partners:

No, no…not on social media...When the right time comes to get a lady, it shouldn’t be through these sites…I believe in myself, I am a man, I can hunt a lady for myself…Why should I use social media? Just because I am blind it doesn’t mean I can’t pursue a lady that I like. I have the capacity to speak for myself and convince a lady… So, me I believe those love sites are just for men who are not confident enough to face a lady and initiate a relationship. (Ben, LHI, 2017)

Social media for a life partner!? No way! Why should I do so, am I not man enough to speak for myself? There are many good ladies even here in campus if I want to start a relationship even now… Once am settled after here, I will just ask a lady out myself. Also, I will be having a job so I will be stable. I will just approach a lady face to face not on social media. (Muthee, LHI, 2017).

Ben and Muthee’s confidence in their ability to find marriage partners and settle down, is not unlike that of other young men of their age and qualifications in HE in Kenya. As illustrated by Muthee, as long as one has a steady job to earn a living, it will be easy for him to find a wife irrespective of his impairments. Yet this is not the case for their female
counterparts. Even with similar qualifications, Neema and Rukia were not sure they would find suitable men willing to settle down with them because as Rukia observes, ‘not many men want to be seen with a woman with disability’. Besides, as demonstrated earlier in the chapter, the likelihood that social media would help was minimal as Rukia’s wish of transferring an online love relationship offline had failed when she realised that the one that she had high hopes on was not genuine. This shows that the offline double discriminations often experienced by women with disabilities in the larger context of Kenya also apply online (Gatheca, 2009; Opini, 2012).

The illustrations above show the determination of these youth and their hope for the future despite the disabling conditions that they still face. Being on social media has significantly enhanced these youth’s independence and helped in fostering the diverse aspirations which, as seen, are mostly shaped by their individual and social circumstances. For example, for youth with visual impairments, the desire for individual independence as young people is crucial. It makes it possible for them to pursue valued things such as chatting online without having to rely on others. This supports their capability for privacy, which is highly valued as observed by Ben, ‘I now have control over my relationships’. For these youth therefore, being in control is not only a valued freedom but also an important functioning (Sen, 2009) which was not possible before without social media.

In many ways, their aspirations for financial autonomy were highly influenced by the awareness of their individual circumstances and social structures. As data reveals, apart from Ken, all the other youth were from backgrounds with very limited financial resources. As such, they often received very restricted funding for their sustenance, and it was insufficient for them to live a ‘good life’ at HE. Thus, their desire for financial freedom was necessitated by the need to have control over their own lives, by not relying on others, and in the way they spend their money. Although they were optimistic about finding paid work after graduating in HE, they observed that social media had widened their possibilities for income generation - hence the various activities that they were involved in.

Being in control of one’s finances is an important capability and functioning, especially for YWD, who are often deprived of resources and thus rely on support from others; it ensures that an individual is free from the consequences that would arise if such help was denied (Oliver, 1990; Sen, 1999). Moreover, in a country where many PWD still suffer deprivations due to social injustices, the possibilities presented by being on social media are highly important. Through these opportunities the youth are able to envision a better
life not only for themselves but also for their families. Appadurai (2004) contends that the capability to aspire is a significant resource for deprived people (such as YWD) to challenge and change the conditions of their own welfare. He thus strongly suggests that there is a need to strengthen this capability by expanding people’s aspirational window (Appadurai, 2004). The present study therefore argues that access to social media is a significant way of enlarging YWD aspirational window.

Nonetheless, for some of these participants, social media is still limited in its ability to foster certain aspirations such as those related to love and marriage especially for female YWD. Rukia and Neema fear that even with the capabilities acquired through social media, they might not be able to actualise this valued functioning, mainly because of societal prejudices that often depict them as asexual and unfit for, or incapable of, motherhood (Oliver, 1990). Rukia’s online experiences with a possible lover who questioned her ability to enjoy sex are similar to many offline experiences of women with disabilities in Kenya. In her article ‘Between Disability and Womanhood in Kenya’, Gatheca (2009) narrates her own frustrations and those of a close friend. Both are middle-class women with physical disabilities who despite having good HE qualifications and jobs, struggle in their aspirations to have ‘a complete family’. They end up as single mothers because, “he took off and married another woman — normal, I heard — because his family rejected a crippled wife for him!” (p. 4). She observes that this is uncommon for men with disabilities with similar credentials. This would explain why the male participants in the current study were optimistic about finding marriage partners after HE and did not feel particularly bothered as Rukia and Neema did. Although the uncertainties expressed by Rukia and Neema are also evident in some studies on disability and social media in the Global North, the potential for female PWD to actualise love and marriage through online relationships in these contexts (Global North) are said to be better (Ellis & Kent, 2011; 2015).

### 7.7 Common conversion factors that have influenced YWD activities on social media and the resulting capabilities

In this section, I explore the common conversion factors that have emerged and seem critical to YWD activities on social media and the formation of the five capabilities identified above. Understanding these dominant conversion factors is crucial for thinking about ways in which YWD could be supported to pursue their valued goals within HE and in future during adulthood.
In discussing these conversion factors, it is important to note that, as illustrated in this discussion and in chapter 6, each of the seven YWD has a unique profile of conversion factors (Robeyns, 2011). Also, the conversion factors identified here do not fall neatly into one category but are often interconnected. Additionally, at times, some conversion factors act as capabilities and vice versa. Overall, according to the data, the major conversion factors are grouped into three main areas as illustrated in table 7. I discuss each of them.

Table 7.1: Common conversion factors influencing YWD activities on social media and the resulting capabilities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Conversion factors</th>
<th>Institutional</th>
<th>Personal</th>
<th>Social</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University policies, physical structures, attitudes and resources</td>
<td>Individual background (individual outlook of life and parental support)</td>
<td>Social relations and belonging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ways in which they used social media</td>
<td></td>
<td>Exposure and networks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Subjects of study at HE</td>
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7.7.1 Institutional conversion factors

Institutional conversion factors relate to the three universities’ structures, resources and attitudes towards YWD. As highlighted in chapter 5 and 6, the three universities had freely available and reliable Wi-Fi, which made it easy for these youth to access social media using their personal phones from different areas within their campuses. The youth cited that this (Wi-Fi) played a significant role in their being able to stay online while on campus. It allowed them easy access to the internet any time and use of social media without having to worry about the cost implications. Ellis & Kent (2015) highlight that access and affordability of reliable internet have a major effect on the benefits that PWD can accrue from using social media. Similarly, Sen (1999; 2009) observes that the ability of an individual to live a life of value is influenced not only by the presence of resources (in this case Wi-Fi/internet) but, most importantly, the substantive freedoms (affordable, reliable internet and ability to choose social media platforms) available to them. As revealed by the data, all the participants enjoyed the mentioned freedoms which made it possible for them to use social media - a desired achievement in itself (Robeyns, 2005). Once on social media, the youth made the choice on what to do in relation to pursing other valued capabilities as shown. The ability to make such choices has a positive influence on their agency, I return to this later in section 7.6.2. Hence, with regards to provision of
resources necessary for accessing social media (Wi-Fi/internet and the associated freedoms), the three universities can be said to have enhanced these youths’ opportunities. The youth are thus able to use social media - a valued end in itself, especially in the context of HE.

Nonetheless, provision of Wi-Fi and the related freedoms is not a sufficient solution to address the deprivations of YWDs’ capabilities in HE. Whilst all the three universities had desktop computers in the library where students could access, and university A had provided all YWD with laptops, data shows that these provisions were limited in various ways. The computers in University A and C had the necessary assistive technology (AT) for students with visual impairments but these were only accessible in the library. Furthermore, because the adapted computers were few, the youth had to make arrangement before they were allowed to use them. This means that the youth had limited choice of when and where to use these computers. Where laptops (University A) were provided, these did not have the essential AT and as Ben and Muthee’s data reveals, the AT was not easily affordable.

Offline structural constraints towards disability are still prevalent in these universities. For example, data reveals that staff and students’ attitudes and the physical infrastructure in University B where Rukia and Ken attended were significantly non-inclusive. The University did not have a disability policy to guide provision and therefore it was not easy to challenge discriminations. Although the university admits YWD and offers tuition funding opportunities for some of them, the impact of these provisions should be measured by looking beyond the number of YWD that receive such support, and instead focus on their overall wellbeing in the campus. Even in University A & C, which had a disability policy and provisions were said to be better, participants cited restrictions with regards to limited accommodation choices and course selection. In this regard therefore, the three universities had failed in providing the substantive freedoms necessary for expanding these youths’ participation in academic and social life (Sen, 1999). Such negative experiences coupled with limited options can have a negative effect on how YWD navigate life in HE and thereafter in adulthood (Walker, 2007). In such cases, many YWD are said to adapt their preferences or withdraw from participation (e.g. Mutanga and Walker, 2015). Although none of the youth in this study had withdrawn their participation, some had adapted their choices with regards to course selection (Petero) and accommodation (Neema, Petero, Ben and Muthee). Whilst this had affected them in various ways, data
reveals that these youth used what was available (social media) and their individual agency to circumvent the challenges so as to actualise their desired goals as students in HE. The agency of these youth and the freedoms associated with being on social media notwithstanding, policy and provision in HE should ensure full inclusion of all students rather than restrict the freedoms and choices of some as shown here. Limiting their choices as shown here, in turn limits their opportunities to exert influence on employment in adulthood. I return to this in chapter eight.

7.7.2 Personal factors: Their activities on social media and how these helped them gain confidence

As data shows, the youth were aware of their impairments and how society responds to their diversities. But these have not stopped them from pursuing their valued ends in HE. Despite Ken and Rukia’s initial struggle with self-esteem issues, mainly because of negative attitudes from their non-disabled peers in University B, data reveals that prior to joining HE all the youth had agency. All of them had worked hard and passed their transition exams well thus joining HE, where they were motivated to participate in learning and other social activities. This was partly because of their positive individual outlook on life and support from their families.

But for Mtawala’s family, all the youth noted that, at home, they were not treated any differently from their other siblings; where this happened as in the case of Rukia (being locked inside the house when her parents left for work), this was mainly to protect her from possible (sexual) abuse outside of the home. Being able to belong to their families gave them a sense of self-worth. Studies within the capability approach shows that such strong connections with the family can positively influence one’s educational pathways (Wilson-Strydom & Okkolin, 2016; Mutanga & Walker, 2015). Moral support from families can enhance the agency of an individual (Wilson-Strydom & Okkolin, 2016) as is evidenced in this thesis.

Through their activities on social media these youth have been able to strengthen their different capabilities (e.g. confidence, voice, social relations and knowledge) all of which contribute to their overall agency and the ability to aspire, as shown. Individually, the youth use social media in different ways, all of which contribute to the expansion of valued capabilities differently. The influence of their offline experiences is evident in the way they express their agency on these media, as observed by Rukia, ‘I think if you know how to use social media for your advantage it can help a lot’. Hence, they were purposeful in
their choices about what social media platforms to use, who to follow and their activities both online and offline.

By using social media in the way they do, they are also seen to express their agency in valued ways. By refusing to allow social arrangements to stop them, these youth assert their agency. Sen (1999; 2004) argues that active involvement in shaping one’s own life and having opportunities to reflect are key to enhancing positive social change and, further, are able to expand individual well-being in ways that people deem valuable (Alkire, 2002). Through their activities on social media, they have been able to enhance their capabilities and, at the same time, by demonstrating their agency through these media, they are able to open up more possibilities to interrupt the prevalent societal attitudes towards disability. In this way, the youth are seen to refuse to adapt to the status that their current environment ascribes to them (Sen, 1999). With such freedoms, the youth are able to strengthen their overall wellbeing as well as that of others within their circle of influence (Robeyns, 2005).

7.7.3 Social relations and belonging

All participants noted that by being on social media, besides their immediate families, they had access to valued social relations including role models who had influenced their self-worth. All seven participants mentioned having role models - people with and without disabilities. Most of the role models without disabilities cited are people who had been disadvantaged through poverty in their past but were now living ‘good lives’ as perceived by the youth. By relating their own lives to these role models (with and without disabilities), the youth gained self-confidence, which enabled them to participate in the various learning and social activities in campus and have positive aspirations for the future.

Data reveals that, irrespective of gender, when these youth talked about role models with disabilities, they tended to identify more with people with impairments similar to theirs. It is also observable that the non-disabled role models were people whose professions were in line with what the youth were currently studying at the university. With a few exceptions, most of these role models were from Kenya. This in itself is important because they can relate with the reality of their own context, unlike role models who are too far removed from their own ‘reality’. Most of these youth had not met their role models offline but by liking and commenting on their posts on YouTube and Facebook, they felt a strong sense of connection with them. The influence of role models in enhancing marginalised youths’ confidence to pursue their aspirations in higher education has been shown in some
studies in Kenya and South Africa (for example, Mkwananzi, 2017; Mutanga, 2015 and Opini, 2012). Although these studies did not focus on social media, they depict the value of role models in enhancing/hindering students’ self-worth and, in turn, their aspirations (Appadurai, 2004; Mkwananzi, 2017).

### 7.8 Conclusion

Building on chapter six, which focused on the lived experiences of social media use by YWD, this chapter has presented the valued capabilities arising from their use of social media. In spite of the observable marginalisations that YWD continue to face in HE and in the larger context of Kenya, through their activities on social media they are able to expand their valued capabilities in HE including confidence, voice, social relations and networks, knowledge, independence and aspirations - all of which make them envision better lives for themselves and enhance their agency. Through their agency and the possibilities offered by social media, these youth may be able to fracture the adaptive preferences that they are often faced with in society and which make them settle for less than if they were not disabled. Although there are commonalities in the capabilities that are possible by using social media amongst all the YWD, the media is still limited in its ability to resolve all the deprivations that are experienced by some YWD.

Nonetheless, social media’s potential in expanding their capabilities and, in turn, their agency is evident. This chapter deepens and expands the ongoing conversations on YWD, higher education and social media within the capability approach. Through the adoption of CA concepts, YWD valued capabilities have been explored, by focusing on the relationship between their individual conversion factors and the contextual factors within HE. The nuances of the experiences of different YWD have been highlighted throughout the chapter. The value of the CA in exploring these complex issues have been shown and will be highlighted further in the next chapter.
Chapter 8: Synthesis of findings

8.1 Introduction

In chapter 6, I presented descriptive data on the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in HE in Kenya. Following this, in chapter 7, I analysed these experiences to understand why YWD value their activities on these media in relation to their current participation in HE and their future plans. Both discussions showed that a holistic analytical approach is essential when evaluating the influences of social media use in YWD lives in relation to what they value as students in HE. This is because of the multifaceted issues that often affect how YWD experience social media and the fact that these effects can manifest in different ways for different YWD. This chapter draws together the different strands that constitute this thesis. It provides an overarching analysis of the key insights that have emerged, highlighting how the research questions were answered and articulating the contribution to the empirical, methodological and theoretical knowledge about the use of capabilities approach in research into YWD lived experiences of social media use in HE in Kenya.

The use of the CA to analyse what YWD value in their use of social media, agency and freedoms available to them in their use of social media in HE represents a distinctive contribution to the capabilities, disability, social media and HE literatures. Chapter 3 showed that while YWD experiences with digital technologies and the internet in HE are increasingly being researched, most of the available studies focus mainly on access/assistive technology issues. These studies are predominantly concentrated in the Global North where policy, practice and the lives of students are different from the Kenyan context. Rather than focus on access issues, this study has used the CA framework to evaluate what YWD value about their use of social media, their agency and the substantive freedoms available to pursue and achieve these valued beings and doings within HE. Findings from the study provide new and nuanced insights on the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in Kenya where these youth are substantially underrepresented in HE. This chapter highlights these insights.

Section 8.2 brings together the key findings of the study, showing how these findings respond to the two research questions. It provides insights into what YWD studying in HE value about their use of social media and how this influences their agency to participate in social and academic life and, in turn, how it relates to their ideas/plans post HE. It
considers the diversities of YWD, the challenges and limitations of social media, and the way in which these findings were highlighted by the use of the CA. Section 8.3 highlights the study’s contribution to the empirical, methodological and theoretical knowledge in the area of YWD, social media and HE. Section 8.4 considers the limitations of using the CA to understand YWD’s lived experiences of social media in HE. Section 8.5 provides the conclusion of the chapter.

8.2 Key findings of the study

This study explored the lived experiences of social media use by a small number of YWD in HE in Kenya. As shown in the description of the study’s setting (chapter 2) and throughout this thesis, YWD voice was at the heart of this research and so use of Sen’s capability approach was appropriate because of its focus on the freedom people have to pursue and achieve the things that they value and its recognition of diversity - hence taking into account an individual’s ability to turn resources into gains or benefits. While the CA provided the framework for analysis, none of its concepts was used explicitly to frame the research questions or influence data collection. I considered that this was important so as not to point the data into a particular direction. The two research questions that guided the study were:

- What are the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in HE in Kenya?
- How does activity on social media influence YWD awareness of present and future possibilities of being in the world?

Chapter 6 addressed the first research question on the lived experiences of YWD social media use in HE. Drawing on data from unstructured interviews, participant profiles, field notes and participants’ social media diaries, the chapter explored the individual experiences of social media usage by all seven participants. It was found that, just like their non-disabled peers, YWD valued social media as an important aspect of their HE student experience. Through their activities on these media YWD assimilate into student culture with greater ease. Although these youth were personally determined to pursue HE, the education system, despite having the apparently facilitating strategies outlined in chapter 2, did not present their transition to HE as the norm. Overall, findings showed that YWD experiences of social media use were varied and that they valued a range of things in their use of these media despite being in the same social context in HE in Nairobi.
As discussed in chapter 7, an important similarity observed amongst all participants is that they enter and participate in student experience online in ways similar to those of their non-disabled peers. Participants acknowledge the role played by social media in relation to enhancing their existing social ties, linking with new connections, keeping up with social information and engaging in some learning, leisure and income generating activities. In this way, YWD are seen to assume a ‘normal’ student experience online devoid of the marginalisations commonly associated with disability and which all the research participants had experienced in some form in their past and current HE context. However, as will be seen later in this discussion, this ‘normal’ performance online meant more than it appeared on the surface; it was a form of enablement which held greater significance for these youth than for their non-disabled peers, and thus valued differently by each of them because of their previous and present individual experiences resulting from disability.

To understand the differences observed, chapter 7 analysed what YWD valued in their use of social media. It answered the second research question above by drawing on the personal and contextual factors of individual YWD provided in chapter 6, photos taken by participants (see chapter 5), and using the CA framework. The chapter looked across individual youths’ past educational experiences and opportunities in relation to their current status in the HE context. I considered that an understanding of their backgrounds would provide insights into why they valued their activities on various social media.

The analysis showed that, overall, these youth experienced offline social discriminations, lack of/restricted choices, environmental barriers and limited financial resources, all of which affected their ability to pursue some of their valued beings and doings in HE. All these things marked them out from many of their non-disabled peers and significantly shaped the way they valued and used social media. It was observed that they were very strategic in their choice of activities and social relations/networks on social media. For these youth therefore, social media was not only a space for ‘normal’ student experience but, most importantly a valued space to pursue valued beings and doings in relation to their individual impairments and their role as students in HE, in a way in which they would otherwise not have been able to access in their offline spaces. This was supported by their agency and the pathways they took once on social media, starting with their social connections with their peers with disabilities and then reaching out to their non-disabled peers and then back to offline spaces.
The analysis revealed that YWD value their use of social media for the following five capabilities: confidence, voice, social relations/networks, knowledge and aspirations. While the capabilities were common across all participants, it was observed that the five were valued by individual YWD differently as is reflected in their various beings and doings in HE. For example, a look at some of their social media groups showed that while Ben and Muthee valued their WhatsApp group (for blind students only) for enabling sharing of information and resources common to their impairments, Rukia and Neema appreciated a WhatsApp group (for female peers with physical impairments) for being a forum where they could candidly share their experiences as young women and support one another. It is also observable that while social media is useful in maintaining positive social relationships with family and friends, it cannot in itself change the nature of an existing relationship. Hence, if a youth chooses not to use it where such relationships are difficult, it does not exacerbate the negative ones in any way.

Although the five capabilities are analysed separately, the analysis showed that they were interrelated and often one was seen to either foster or strengthen the other. For example, confidence supports independence which in turn reinforces the capability for voice, as is seen in many of the youth. Rukia and Ken’s data shows that while their rich peers in the private university made them feel unwelcome, the two felt more confident after seeing the accomplishments of their role models on social media. This strengthened their determination to navigate study and life on campus, “I am here to get education not inclusion… I will do all I can to get it…I work hard” (Rukia, PA, 2017) and, “With such inspiration, the rich kids’ attitudes no longer bother me…I remain focused on my work” (Ken, LHI, 2017). Similarly, despite having no money to buy the necessary assistive technology to access some valued social media platforms, with support from a Facebook group of peers with visual impairments, Ben learned how to hack the software and started going online.

Being able to participate online without having to rely on help from others, as he previously had to, enhanced his independence and, in turn, his voice, as he was now able to contribute to group discussions even when he could not attend offline meetings. Furthermore, having access to the different social media gave him choice to access varied forums to make his voice count on issues that mattered to him both in class and in other areas of life on campus; voice also reinforces the capability independence, as demonstrated earlier. Thus, we begin to see how the capabilities are interdependent and supportive of
these youths’ individuality and ability to participate in HE and of their looking forward into the future. For many of these YWD, such freedoms were traditionally not possible; this therefore shows why they highly regard social media in their lives.

Together, these capabilities elucidate how social media can widen YWD freedoms in various aspects of their beings and doings in HE. As a technology, social media, unlike other past technologies, may act differently in terms of addressing social justice issues because individuals may be similarly agentive on these platforms regardless of the resources (tangible and intangible) they bring to it. This is mainly because of social media’s dynamic nature in terms of membership, content creation and flexibility in allowing members to participate in a way that is preferable to them (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The data and analysis in chapters 6 and 7 have shown that once on social media, YWD, like their non-disabled peers, have similar opportunities to use their agency freedom to be and do what they value if they choose to. Online, YWD have options in terms of content and communication abilities as opposed to offline spaces where their choices are frequently restricted because of social discrimination and environmental barriers. For many YWD in Kenya, a lack of/limited choice is a major hindrance to their desire to achieve valued beings and doings in education (Gathoni, 2014; Groce, 2016; Mugo et al., 2010) and reduces their individual freedom, agency and opportunities in adult life (Sen, 2009).

Furthermore, social media may have a ‘double’ effect on the capabilities that are possible for YWD. For example, by gaining confidence YWD may become more familiar with the world in ways that they were previously not privy to and, in turn, desire to participate in other aspects of life, in similar ways to their non-disabled peers. This is crucial in challenging the dominant social representations and assumptions about YWD and in turn helps in breaking adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999) that often face YWD and make them settle for less, especially in social and economic spaces in Kenya and other contexts of Sub-Saharan Africa (Grech, 2009; Groce et al., 2011). Because of the widened access to these social and economic spaces, YWD are able to take, and create, opportunities (exercise their agency) rather than wait to be ‘given’ opportunities as is the norm in society.

This is not only good for their independence but also for increasing their visibility in offline spaces, which is crucial in making their voice count on social justice issues, particularly with regards to breaking down the power imbalances that characterise the policy and practice for YWD in these spaces (Mugo et al, 2010; Opini, 2012; Terzi, 2010).
The findings here highlight a significant contribution of the CA in this study which is not accounted for in other models of disability. By exercising their agency as shown, YWD are able to recast their futures; they refuse to depend on their non-disabled peers to hand them opportunities as is common in affirmative action legislations popular with the charity and social models of disability (Oliver, 1990). In this way, we are able to see a ‘new generation’ of ‘inclusion’ different from the previous one where YWD were included on the basis of sympathy or the ‘goodwill’ of others in society (Shakespeare & Watson, 2015). Instead, because of YWD agency, the inclusion space is now transformed as they enter as equal contributors. This is different from ‘rights’ as provided in the social model of disability which, although important, cannot guarantee process freedom which, as shown here, enables the youth to decide and act on what they deem valuable for them. I return to this in sections 8.2.1 and 8.3 and in chapter 9.

The findings have also shown how social media opens up new aspirational possibilities and enlarges YWD horizons for action in ways that would not have been possible before. All YWD imagined better lives for themselves and their families and thus worked hard in their studies in addition to pursuing income-generating activities through social media (Facebook and WhatsApp). Data has shown how these youth use their social media opportunities to follow through their aspirations. Through their online connections and networks, many of them have learned about professional bodies in their areas of study which they have joined and contribute to through online debates; they have also reached out to mentors with whom they meet both offline and online via Facebook and Skype. Ben’s data shows how such involvement makes him ‘known’ in legal circles, which is crucial in enhancing his career in law. Similarly, Rukia’s involvement in social media campaigns for YWD has made her visible in the traditional media world, and she was invited to host a TV programme in one of the media companies as a result. Besides being a significant achievement for her at this stage, it also gives her more visibility offline for other future aspirations. In this way, therefore, social media provides a more potent avenue through which YWD can break down socially constructed barriers and realise their aspirations.

This confirms previous studies which show that there is no lack of aspirations amongst marginalised groups but, rather, a real limitation of ‘resources’ (networks, finances or physical means) to actualise these aspirations (Appadurai, 2004; Walker, 2006). Research within the CA shows that aspirations are significant when evaluating the possibilities of
whether an individual has genuine opportunities to choose from in pursuing what they value (Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015). I return to this later in the chapter.

8.2.1 Collective capabilities and uses of agency

Inherent to this study is that YWD have agency and that joining social media can help expand their agency to pursue the things they value in HE. This is a strength of the CA which is not observable with other models of disability such as the medical and the charity models which assume that people are passive and that others have to make decisions on their behalf. The study has shown how, once on social media, YWD use their agency to do things that matter to them, such as: chatting online, ‘friending’, ‘unfriending’, watching videos, sharing photos online (Facebook), and participating in learning activities with peers. The motivation and focus they develop as a result of being involved in these activities drives their determination to further use their agency in other valued areas.

Through social media, YWD have access to information about rights which they use to challenge discriminatory practices and decisions against them, as shown in chapter 6. Previously, this was not easy as YWD relied on others within their circle of influence to ‘speak for them’. Being able to speak and advocate for themselves gives them greater say in the nature of what they are advocating for, as has been demonstrated in the data; it also has an empowering effect on their self-worth and enhances their capability to be confident. At the same time, with the knowledge about rights, they sensitise other YWD who are not in HE and may not have access to the same or lack capacity to do so at the moment. Data in chapter 6 illustrates that many of these youth maintain connections with their former schools/teachers and often go back to speak to and encourage their former peers and the next generation of students. In so doing, these youth use their agency not only to empower themselves but also to benefit others. This reflects Sen’s observation about agency as not necessarily limited to an individual’s well-being but also, “what a person can do in line with his or her conception of the good.” (Sen, 1985, p.206). This is important as it contributes to greater equality amongst these traditionally disempowered youth and fosters their collective agency (Ibrahim, 2006).

Although Sen ignores the role of collective agency (see section 8.4), other writers within the CA such as Ibrahim (2006) have exemplified its significance in nurturing positive individual and communal change through self-help initiatives amongst marginalised groups. She observes that by pooling their capabilities, marginalised groups are able to
create and seize new opportunities and enhance their well-being. Findings in the current study echo her observations. It is observable that through social media YWD have accrued collective agency with each other and with their non-disabled peers. This collective agency helps them realise individual and collective goals within HE with greater ease. The analysis has illustrated how social media enlarges these youths’ access to valuable social relations and networks beyond their immediate families and circle of friends. By incorporating new relations and networks, YWD increase their capabilities to mobilise access to new information and opportunities, which they then use to further increase their agency to participate in some offline spaces in HE.

Worth noting is the trajectory of their collective agency, which is seen as two way and dynamic in nature, moving backwards and forwards across online/offline spaces. This is an important finding for this study. On the one hand, it starts with individual YWD activities on social media; as illustrated in chapter 6 and 7, many of them go online with fears that their past experiences of discrimination in offline spaces may be replicated online. However, through their activities on social media, they get exposure to role models who help them gain a sense of confidence in themselves and, in turn, to appear in offline spaces without shame (Sen, 1999). Consequently, it becomes easy for them to pool together as YWD in HE and empower one another within their groups. Being together in these groups is transformative in itself; it equips them to think beyond their individual impairments as they now understand that, ‘I am not alone’. In this way they draw strength from one another. Through their social media groups, they share knowledge, experiences and opportunities which facilitates their freedoms to pursue other valued beings and doings, individually and collectively, more easily - as illustrated by Neema: ‘Like in campus, we started photocopying and printing services...so like we are not left behind by others.’ (Neema, SMM, 2017).

On the other hand, as students in HE, YWD identify with their non-disabled peers and have membership in the various student associations both online and offline. Data shows that they are active participants in these groups. Mtawala credits his fellow YWD for using Facebook to campaign for him amongst their non-disabled friends, who, in turn, reached out to their networks, thus ensuring his current post as a student leader. In this way, YWD are seen to take up active roles in society in similar ways to their non-disabled peers and thus challenge the prevalent representations of YWD in society, which views them as passive and needing help (Oliver, 1990). Moreover, as highlighted earlier, this is
significant in helping fracture adaptive preferences in which YWD frequently find themselves and which make them settle for less due to a lack of/restricted opportunities (Sen, 1999). Nevertheless, they still maintain their groups as YWD and often go back to them, as these are seen as the basis of their expanding voice.

Additionally, through such collective activities on social media, YWD have amplified their online and offline visibility in HE; this is important for agitating for their rights. This is well illustrated in Mtawala’s analogy of Facebook as a ‘place’, ‘Where we throw our stones, it is our (…) Road…this is where we make our voices heard’. Here, Mtawala, demonstrates how YWD have learned to use their Facebook group to make their voices count on matters that affect them as students in HE. Besides, through their membership and participation in the wider University students’ Facebook and WhatsApp groups, YWD are able to mobilise the support of their non-disabled peers when highlighting any form of social injustice, especially when dealing with some oppressive University administrations. In various instances, Mtawala and other participants in University A and C mentioned that through such collective agency, situations often changed fast, as the concerned offices feared that their solidarity would lead into violent demonstrations often led by their non-disabled peers. They are therefore able to have a stronger political voice and representation, which is crucial for ensuring greater visibility in offline spaces and acceptance as part of ‘the norm’. But for social media, traditionally, such mobilisations would not be easy for YWD because of the challenges illustrated in chapter 2 and the individual experiences of YWD as shown in chapter 6 - for example, Petero’s struggles after the train accident that left him impaired and subsequently being denied opportunities to study in a secondary school of his choice and follow his dream of studying architecture at HE. In this way, we are able to see how, in one generation, social media is helping break long held traditional barriers and enabling YWD to do things that they value in similar ways to other youth growing up in this age of social media.

The findings have also shown that YWD can exercise their agency freedom differently (Sen, 2009,1999) while using social media. While some choose to use social media as a source/resource for their learning activities in HE, others believe these media cannot be trusted in this regard and thus refuse to use them for their academic work. The differences in the way they respond are mostly influenced by their previous offline experiences and knowledge of social media. Mtawala and Neema’s knowledge and experience of social media (they mainly used Facebook and WhatsApp) is that these media are mostly for
social activities and not for academic work. Despite being aware that some of their peers used the media to search for learning materials, the two refused to use the media in this way. In addition, they mentioned that they do not accept any online friend requests from people unless they are familiar with them through offline relations. This is mostly because of their experiences growing up with disability and the prejudices surrounding them in their communities. Thus, we see how previous offline experiences influence their agency online. In refusing to use social media in this way the two can still be seen to exercise their agency freedom.

Additionally, it is observable that YWD ‘agency’ can be understood in different ways. Because their goals are varied, they are able to choose different ways to move towards actualising them. This is shown in the choices they make regarding the social media platform they use, the type of activities they engage in or not and the people/networks they subscribe to. These youth can be viewed as using their agency strategically. For example, Rukia notes that, ‘I just don’t follow anybody, I follow people whose postings can build me, people who are impacting society’ (Rukia, PA, 2017). Others like Petero and Ken are very strategic in the way they use academic social media forums such as Academia.edu and Research Gate, where they have access to learning resources for their academic participation in HE. Through these platforms, they follow people who they view as specialists in their areas of study and establish further contacts with them through LinkedIn either for support with further resources or in anticipation for future support such as finding internships and employment opportunities. Data shows that many of these youth had reached out to professionals in their areas of study and were receiving mentorship.

Data has also shown that, even with limited options of access to social media, these youth are able to exercise their agency freedom in the best way possible to actualise their desire to go online instead of sitting and doing nothing about their situation. Examples from Muthee and Ben show that because of lack of financial resources, their agency with regards to the ability to acquire necessary AT is constrained. This hinders their access to some of their valued social media platforms (WhatsApp and YouTube). The two therefore decide to join a Facebook group with fellow peers with visual impairments, where they learn how to hack the mentioned AT and consequently gain access to the two social media platforms. Although this is illegal, it is an example of agency freedom which is not necessarily in line with their wellbeing (for example, they could be prosecuted) but helps them towards pursuit of broader goals (Sen, 1999). From the above discussion, we are able
to see how the expansion of these youths’ agency freedom goes hand in hand with the expansion of valued capabilities: that is, in order to be agents of their lives in HE, YWD need freedom to be able to access and use social media of their choice. It also shows that increased agency in one area can improve agency in another (even though this is not always the case).

8.2.2 Scope of social media in the lives of YWD

Notwithstanding the exemplified benefits, social media is still not able to solve all the social barriers that limit YWD participation in HE. Many of the new freedoms that YWD achieve through social media clash with traditional barriers. For example, there is a lot of evidence of persisting negative attitudes within the context of HE which social media cannot change. For example, in University B which Ken and Rukia attend, social class issues restrict their attempts to fully belong. Their ‘rich peers’ were unwelcoming; hence it was challenging for them to form new offline relations and networks within campus. Data from the two illustrate that forming genuine friendships under these circumstances was not easy. They frequently mention that they have learned to be ‘wise’ in their interactions with these peers, who were mainly interested in the academic help that Ken and Rukia gave them. Thus, most of Ken and Rukia’s offline social networks were more inclined towards fellow YWD, many of whom happened to be former colleagues from secondary school. Such offline isolations/exclusions make it difficult for YWD to access normal student experiences in HE. For some of these YWD therefore, the full benefits of HE may be unobtainable (Mutanga & Walker, 2015).

Data in chapter 6 has shown specific challenges that different YWD experience in the process of accessing and using social media in HE. This relates to the ‘digital divide’ that is often observed in research with YWD in HE (Ascunson et al, 2012; Lewthwaite, 2011) and PWD in general (Ellis & Kent, 2015; 2011). For youth with visual impairments, the freedom to access (assistive technology and affordability) to go online and the ability to maintain a presence on these platforms is significantly limited. None of the three participants with visual impairments had the required financial resources to purchase the necessary screen reader. Despite knowing about social media and having smartphones on joining HE, they still could not participate in their preferred platforms independently until they had learned how to hack the software as shown above. By excluding YWD from the inception/design stage and in terms of cost, social media serves to propagate the hegemonic debates of disability as essentially related to dependence (Roy & Lewthwaite,
As highlighted in chapter 1, these debates (e.g. the charity and medical models) often have a limited view of YWD (PWD in general) which sees them as needy and/or having a deficit hence they need to be ‘provided for’. In the same way, by not being inclusive from the onset, social media is seen to support these discourses.

Access restrictions have also been observed in terms of substantive freedoms to participate in academic and social life, in two ways. On the one hand, there are challenges because some social media platforms are not easily accessible to all YWD equally. Most youth with visual impairments (blind and low vision) require AT to go online. This has also been noted by previous studies (e.g. Ellis & Kent, 2015; Lewthwaite, 2011), which view the ongoing challenges as often deliberate and intended to continue the domination of existing elite groups over such marginalised youth, especially bearing in mind that there have been continued calls for full inclusion of PWD in these media.

On the other hand, while social media has increased YWD capabilities to participate in online social life together with their non-disabled peers, for many YWD, this freedom is not easily transferable to some offline social spaces; this was observed in all three universities. For example, in spite of the various accommodations present in university A and C – which are said to be more inclusive – YWD’s freedom of mobility is still restricted due to a lack of physical access to buildings and untarmacked pathways. Although Neema has good friends on campus, she could not join them in ‘fun’ activities such as parties as much as she would love to; this was an important part of being in HE in which she wanted to participate. She also mentioned her frustration in the fact that although her friends often visited her, she rarely reciprocated the visits to their rooms because of the same problem of accessibility. In her view, this was a valued aspect of friendship on which she was missing out. Similarly, Ben and Muthee have learned to ‘enjoy bashes’ through photos posted on Facebook or shared via WhatsApp. Although they wanted to attend these parties (mostly held by their classmates), many of them took place in the main campus, which is not easily accessible to them because the pathways are not navigable.

Through such environmental barriers, YWD continue to miss out on these parties, visits to friends and informal ‘hang abouts’, all of which are considered ‘normal’ student activities and enjoyed by their non-disabled peers. Their inability to socialise in these valued activities is thus a form of social injustice brought about by the same accommodations that have been put in place to support their inclusion in HE. Similar observations have been observed in Mutanga and Walker’s (2015) study on students with disabilities in HE in
South Africa. This therefore points back to the need to listen to the voices of YWD about what really matters to them as students in HE - as observed earlier in the chapter, YWD are rarely consulted even on such important issues that concern their lives. Combined, such injustices and isolation may affect these youths’ ability to socialize and network when they leave HE.

Additionally, for Ben and Muthee, enjoying the full benefits from the photos and other images posted online is not possible due to the nature of their impairment. Despite having the necessary screen readers, these cannot fully interpret the images as they really are. A full comprehension of these images is thus not possible for them and they may have to rely on their non-disabled peers to describe such photos/images for them. Disability studies show that for some impairments - especially where verbal cues or visual ability is required to interpret images - disability may be unavoidable even with increased resources or changes in environment (Mitra, 2018; Shakespeare, 2014).

8.3 Contributions of the research

In this section, I highlight the study’s contribution to the empirical, theoretical and methodological knowledge.

8.3.1 Empirical Contributions

The first contribution of this study is that it has addressed an important empirical gap in the literature of YWD and their experiences of social media use in HE within Kenya and other Sub-Saharan Africa. As the literature review in chapter 3 has shown, social media is a core component of youths’ (with/without disabilities) everyday life. Whilst this phenomenon has been increasingly researched amongst non-disabled youth, little is known about YWD lived experiences of these media, particularly the value they attach to the media in their lives. Focusing on what YWD value has been useful in foregrounding their voice, which was central to the study. Although small scale, by researching the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in Kenya, the study has contributed rare empirical data in an area of research where experiences from the Global North are predominant (Roy & Lewthwaite, 2016); it provides a significant foundation for future studies in this area to build on and enhance the visibility of voices of YWD from the Global South in research on social media.
The second contribution, which is closely related to the first, is that the study set out to challenge the dominant negative rhetoric around YWD and their engagement with social media outlined in chapter 3. I looked at how they are using social media regardless of the device. Most of the available studies are explicitly focused on AT in relation to YWD access to social media. These approaches tend to have a ‘deficit’ view of YWD as is common in the medical model of disability (Oliver, 1990). Such rhetoric not only denies the social construction of disability (chapter 1) but also assumes that YWD are not already participating in social media and can only do so if they are provided with technical solutions, hence the focus on assistive technologies; this study has shown otherwise as illustrated earlier.

Thirdly, by putting the emphasis on what YWD value, insights into their agency have been illuminated. Through their individual and collective agency, YWD have shown that they can include themselves on their own terms even when excluded from technological developments that may benefit them such as social media. By focusing on YWD agency, the study has revealed positive narratives of how their engagement on social media contributes to shaping their participation in HE. In this way, this study provides an important departure from most of the existing international research, which mostly considers the digital divide that YWD face when using these media, and often depicts them as ‘digitally left out’ and frustrated and thus seen to avoid some of these media (Lewthwaite, 2011; Söderström, 2009). As illustrated in the study, while these issues are crucial, they only reveal a partial picture of YWD engagement with the new media. This study has helped contribute to our understanding by showing how what YWD value provides an explanation for why they are actively involved online even on platforms which may have initially excluded them through the way the platforms are designed; this has clearly shown these youths’ agency and in effect ensured their voice, which this study sought to enable from the onset.

A fourth contribution is that this study gives evidence that YWD are not only focused on their individual capabilities and well-being but are also concerned about the capabilities of other YWD within their circle of influence who may not have access to the opportunities they have in HE. In this way they not only demonstrate their moral agency (Sen, 1992) but also show that it is possible for traditionally marginalised groups to empower one another and increase their political voice as a group. These findings affirm other research in the area of disability and new media which show that social media is increasing disability
awareness and rights, claiming space where traditional media had significantly failed (e.g. Alper & Goggin 2017; Ellis & Kent, 2017). Importantly, through their use of social media, YWD have the freedom and space to rewrite their own stories and challenge the prejudiced ways in which the old media has frequently displayed and represented them (Barnes, 1992).

The fifth contribution is that whereas most studies from the Global North frequently highlight the social benefits that YWD accrue from being on social media (e.g. Ascunson et al., 2012; Ellis & Kent, 2017), the current study shows that in addition to the social advantages, YWD in Kenya are significantly attracted to social media because of ‘other aspirations’ that are possible through these media. In this sense, their use of social media is very much like that of most of their non-disabled peers within HE in Kenya. The participants in this study show that, just like many non-disabled colleagues within HE, YWD are not waiting for opportunities to be handed to them as is common with the charity model of disability. Instead, they demonstrate their agency through their active use of social media to enhance their capabilities. This is particularly important as it helps dismantle some of the prevalent disability stereotypes that view YWD as incapable and needing help/sympathy to manage their lives (Oliver, 1990, 1996). Through the choices made available through social media, and their agency, YWD show that they too can take control of and create their own futures. From these insights, we start seeing that it is possible for YWD to fracture the adaptive preferences (Sen, 1999) that often restrict their capabilities to pursue valued beings and doings in HE for a lack of/limited choice. With the necessary structures in place, they too can contribute to Kenya’s development activities when they leave HE. This is significant in promoting their visibility in society and therefore ensuring they have a strong voice of their own, which is helpful in influencing policy and addressing the social injustices that they – and others like them - are faced with in most offline spaces.

The last contribution is that, unlike most of the international studies reviewed in chapter 3, which often portray YWD as actively hiding their impairments online, the YWD in the current study did not conceal their impairments. Although some had expressed initial reservations on posting their photos online - mostly for fear of people’s reactions - their exposure to role models with disabilities on social media helped enhance their self-worth to the extent that they too felt confident having their own photos online. This gave them a sense of empowerment as they are able to be “themselves” without having to worry about
what other people think. Furthermore, this has helped increase their offline confidence and, in turn, contributed to their enhanced capabilities to participate in learning and other social activities in HE and increased their visibility as well as familiarity for ‘the group’. This is a significant way through which disempowered YWD can increase their freedoms and break down social barriers. It has also shown how YWD’s agency to pursue valued beings and doings are shaped by the intersections of their personal and environmental (online/offline) contexts.

These findings are significant and timely, coming soon after the recently concluded Global Disability Summit held in the UK in July 2018 and organised by UK’s DFID in conjunction with the government of Kenya (GOV. UK, 2018). Amongst other recommendations, the summit acknowledged the need for developing assistive technology to enhance PWD participation in society and thus earmarked the setting up of an innovation hub in Nairobi by the year 2020. While these efforts are commendable, this study is concerned that many of the envisioned assistive technologies are geared, ‘to transform access to and affordability of life-changing devices and basic technology, such as wheelchairs, prosthetics, hearing aids and glasses’. (emphasis added) (GOV. UK, 2018). This approach reverts back to the medical model of disability which, as shown in chapters 2, 3 and section 8.2 above, is deficit-oriented in its approach to issues of PWD and thus assumes that they need to be ‘fixed’ by such devices (Oliver, 1990; Söderström, 2014). While not discounting the significance of the identified ‘basic’ assistive technologies in the lives of most PWD in Kenya, and others globally, the current study emphasizes the need to think beyond these rudimentary technologies and incorporate the new media and other related ICT in the planned endeavours, particularly with regards to meeting the needs of YWD, who are said to be the most marginalised (chapter 2). In so doing, the study reinforces Christiansen et al.’s (2006) observations that no matter their geographical locations, youth with/without disabilities are mainly committed to new technological inventions of learning, earning and communicating as ways of attaining life chances. I return to this in chapter 9.

Ultimately, it is essential to consider and implement the planned ideas with and not for PWD (YWD). As the current findings have shown, and in support of previous observations (for example, Ellis & Kent, 2015; Seale, 2013), YWD should be included in such development initiatives as knowledgeable others; not just because of their experiences of living with impairments/ disability but, most importantly, as individuals with choice,
agency, skills, and knowledge that can be enhanced to contribute to development activities. Besides, Sen emphasizes the need for marginalised groups such as YWD to be given opportunity, “In shaping their own destiny, and not just as passive recipients of the fruits of cunning development programs” (Sen, 1999, p.53). Research in the area of YWD shows that little attention is given to developing these youths’ voice to articulate their perspectives and experiences of the world they live in and the world they desire (see, Gathoni, 2014; Groce, et. al., 2011; Mutanga & Walker, 2015; Singal, 2009).

Technology studies which focus on social justice issues and development emphasise not only the finished product but most importantly the building of marginalised groups’ (YWD) capacity to initiate and develop their own technologies (Hatakka & Lagsten, 2012; Kleine, 2010; 2013). This recognises their agency and gives them choice both of which are essential for expanding their substantive freedoms and consequently breaking down the social assumptions that depict YWD as incapable and always needing help from their non-disabled peers and development projects such as the above.

8.3.2 Theoretical Contributions

Using the CA in this study has allowed for a holistic approach to the substantive freedoms (personal and contextual) available to support/ inhibit the realization of YWD valued beings and doings in their use of social media in HE both as individuals and collectively. In this way, the CA has helped reveal certain nuances as to why YWD use and value social media in the way they do, which would not have been possible with other models of disability. Furthermore, as shown in chapter 3, many studies on YWD and their use of social media in HE mostly concentrates on accessibility issues. None has focused on what YWD value and why they value these things. The study has illuminated that YWD’s value of their activities on social media is located in their individual experiences and in the broader social context within and outside HE. For this reason, their value of their beings and doings on social media often responds to these needs. The CA has allowed for an in-depth analysis of these insights, showing how personal, social and structural factors intersect to influence YWD use of and value for social media.

Exploring these issues not only aids our understanding of the real freedoms that YWD have to use social media in HE but also why they are using these media, how well they are succeeding in being/doing what they value, their individual wellbeing, the opportunities available to them and their aspirations (Robeyns, 2003; 2011). As is shown in the CA, any
assessment of their lived experiences of social media use that fails to account for these
issues does not necessarily provide sufficient information on their capabilities (Sen, 2009).
The CA has therefore provided a method to assess the substantive freedoms available for
YWD use of social media and equally to identify ‘unfreedoms’, exclusions and
marginalisations (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007). Being able to identify these issues is
fundamental; it opens up a space for action towards the establishment of meaningful
opportunities for successful participation for YWD in HE and the general aim of equity
and social justice (Terzi, 2010).

Secondly, the CA has helped in understanding YWD agency within a more holistic context
with regards to what they value and choose to do through their activities on social media
and reveals “layers of complexity” that may not be easily highlighted in other analyses
(Robeyns, 2005b, p. 194). As agents determining their own lives, YWD have
demonstrated what they value and why they value these things; they have also shown their
involvement in pursuing these valued things through their activities on social media and in
offline spaces in HE. Through their agency, these youth have shown that they do not wait
for their non-disabled peers to include them; instead they themselves take the initiative to
include themselves on their own terms. This has a transformative effect on them as
evidenced in their increased confidence, participation in life at HE and aspirations. As
shown earlier, this helps to dismantle the adaptive preferences that often limit their
freedoms to pursue their full potential in life (Sen, 1999).

In this way, it is observable that YWD are able to change the common negative narratives
and assumptions which depict them as dependent and needing help either from
family/friends or through affirmative actions as seen in chapter 2. Through their agency the
youth have shown that it is possible to introduce ‘new forms of inclusion’ necessary to
address inequalities. Further, in using their agency, YWD not only empower themselves
but they are able to look outside and “uplift the lives of others” (Sen, 2009 p. 89). The
ability to enhance the lives of others is an important form of freedom: in this case, not
simply the ‘absence from restraint’ but freedom that is located in their broader social
context. While this might slightly restrict their own individual freedoms, it is freedom to do
what one values but one can value enhancing the lives of others (Sen, 2009).

Besides, not only does the CA give us insights into YWD agency but most importantly it
makes it possible to see the differences and the relationship between their agency in online
and offline spaces. As shown in chapter 6 and section 8.2.1 in this chapter, these youth
seem to have more agency online as evidenced in the various beings and doings on social media. Through their activities online, the youth realize that there are some offline barriers that can actually be moved. In itself this is empowering; it gives them more confidence to keep pushing such obstacles and in effect decrease their disadvantage offline and thereby create more room for further inclusion; this is something that these youth could not do before.

A third theoretical contribution of the CA is that it has provided space to assess the aspirations of YWD and the process through which they are formed. This would not have been possible with other models of disability, such as the social model, which is deeply rooted in the here and now of barrier removal and rights. This model, though necessary in order to ensure that all people’s needs are met, is insufficient because it does not guarantee process freedom (Sen, 1999) which is crucial in enabling people to have choice and confidence to decide what they deem valuable for their future, as shown by the participants in this study. The CA has enabled us to see how YWD activities on social media influence their aspirations – in many cases widening them - as well as providing the means to fulfil their aspirations. That is, their engagement with social media facilitates and changes their aspirations as well as opens up opportunities for them to actualize these newly formed aspirations. Understanding these influences and how they interact with each other is therefore important if YWD have to be supported to ensure they achieve their aspirations (Hart, 2013; 2016). Studies in the CA show that aspirations are essential in assessing an individual’s freedom (Mkwananzi, 2017; Walker, 2006) and that the freedom to aspire is valuable for human flourishing in its own right (Hart, 2016). As demonstrated in chapter 6 and in section 8.2 above, all the youth imagined better lives for themselves and for their families and variously used their agency online and offline to work towards these future goals. Through their social connections/ networks and agency on social media, the youth have illustrated that these media are more potent in helping to dismantle existing social barriers and ensure YWD achieve their aspirations.

8.3.3 Methodological Contributions

The first methodological contribution is in the participatory approach used in the study. Working with YWD as ‘co-researchers’ allowed them to freely articulate, in their own words, their valued beings and doings, what was constrained, as well as their aspirations; this was fundamental for the study as it aimed to enable their voice. As detailed in the methodology chapter, the methods used were creative, youth friendly and sensitive to their
individual differences. Furthermore, the process of data collection - using the social media maps and the self-directed photography project - was transformative as it allowed individual participants to reflect on their own use of social media and the value it has for them and has contributed to their capability to be critical about their social and educational experiences. The youth have identified social injustices that they perceived in their respective social settings with respect to their individual differences and have been able to question why they had to contend with these issues.

Although using this approach and methods presented some challenges (see the methodology chapter), it has enabled rich in-depth insights into the study and created an empowering experience for the youth. Such a holistic view in assessing people’s lives is something that scholars in the areas of disability, educational inclusion and ICT4D have long called for (e.g. Hatakka & Lagsten, 2012; Kleine, 2010 & Terzi, 2005; 2010) but is still slow-growing in terms of exemplars. The youth, through my ongoing communication with most of them, acknowledge benefiting from the research process. For example, Ben has shown how the use of photography helped him conceptualise the value of social media in his life as a ‘wide open gate’ through which he has learned a lot about disability and life and reflected on how this has enhanced his independence and aspirations, in a manner that he would not have imagined. Rukia has shared how taking part in the research has helped her be proactive in using social media to advance her aspirations. Through her activities on social media, she has been offered a part-time job in one of the media houses, stood for and won a student leadership position and participated in training on youth citizenship and participation through social media in the UK. Likewise, Ken has joined a social media research lab started at their university shortly after the data collection.

The second methodological contribution relates to the fact that I worked with a heterogeneous group of participants, which has allowed for a greater understanding of their lived experiences of social media use from diverse perspectives. As detailed in the methodology chapter, the participants were different with regards to their gender, type of impairments, social media platforms used, educational backgrounds, type of university attended and study areas. All these impacted their use and value for social media differently. Working with such a diverse group of youth has provided a wider informational basis of assessing YWD’s capabilities and functionings (Robeyns, 2005) and in effect expanded the study’s understanding of why they use and value social media in the way they do. This is an important contribution upon which future research can build.
Thirdly and closely linked to the above, as discussed in chapter 4, the main purpose of this study was not to generate any ‘idealist list’ of capabilities (Sen, 1999; 2009) but to use the CA as a framework for understanding the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in HE and what they value about their activities on these media and in effect enable their voice to be heard; this cannot be narrowed down to a list. The five themes/capabilities identified and discussed here were selected using Sen’s suggestions on the need to allow participants to choose the capabilities that are valuable to them (2009). Whilst the youth were not explicitly asked what capabilities they valued, I inferred what they value about social media from the individual interviews, social media map conversations and the self-directed photography project with all seven participants as detailed in the methodology chapter. From similar data across all the seven participants, I collated the areas that youth value about social media - hence the five capabilities. This approach has enabled these valued beings and doings to be considered in their own right and thus captured the nuances associated with the diversities of YWD and their particular HE context in Kenya in a manner that would not be realised in a predetermined list of capabilities.

8.4 Limitations of using the CA in this study

The CA’s emphasis on individual freedoms and functionings underrates the value of collective capabilities and agency. This study has shown the freedoms that individual YWD accrue by joining certain social media groups and networks with one another. The value of collective capabilities and collective agency becomes particularly crucial in a study like this, which seeks to amplify the voice of marginalized YWD in contexts prevalent with power imbalances which serve to restrict their freedoms and opportunities. As Deneulin (2008) asserts, while the tension between the individual and the group can operate at the theoretical level, it cannot be sustained when the CA becomes a guiding framework for social justice. Although helpful in its focus on freedoms and agency, the CA is insufficient for evaluating collective agency. This study thus joins Ibrahim’s (2006) call to reiterate the importance of extending the CA to include collective agency, particularly for the few YWD in HE whose visibility can be enhanced through online and offline collective agency as exemplified here. Further, despite its usefulness as an evaluative framework for assessing social arrangements in terms of capabilities, the CA does not specify or give guidance on how a just society might be organized, thus making it inadequate with regards to analyzing social power and social constraints on choice (Robeyns, 2003). This creates tension between choice and equity, which are significant to
public policy issues and consequently, the inclusion of YWD in education (Norwich, 2014).

The other challenge involves the complexity that is evident when operationalizing freedoms and capabilities as used in the CA. These findings have shown that deciding what is a capability or functioning is not straightforward. Thus, highlighting the complex challenge of understanding the multiple interconnections between the two and how to assess each of them is important. For example, although confidence was identified as a fundamental capability for YWD in the study, in that with confidence they were able to appear in public without shame and thus able to pursue other valued capabilities, in itself, confidence is also a functioning - an end itself. Similarly, knowledge appears both as an end in itself (knowing about social media) as well as a means to an end, in that YWD can use knowledge gained from social media to pursue other valued capabilities. These findings therefore show that any framework that tries to categorise eventually breaks, especially when concepts are still developing around it. It illustrates the usefulness of frameworks in helping people visualize the new paradigm; however, they (frameworks) can limit people to thinking that the latest is the last, when it is just a developmental stage.

8.5 Conclusion

This chapter has drawn together the various strands that constitute the thesis. Using the capability approach has enabled a comprehensive analysis into the lived experiences of social media use by YWD in higher education, showing not only their activities and achievements on these media but also why they value these beings and doings in relation to their social and environmental spaces. Unlike the widespread barriers that YWD experience in these offline contexts, social media provides a significant space for them to exercise their agency to be and do what they value in a manner that is traditionally not possible for them.

The capability approach has helped us understand the relationship between these youths’ online and offline agency. Through their agency online, the youth discover that there are some offline barriers that can actually be moved; the new freedoms act as a catalyst and give them confidence to pursue their aspirations offline. In this way the youth are seen to take and create opportunities rather than wait to be ‘given’ as is often the case in society. With the widened choices, these youth are therefore able to include themselves in their own terms and thus decrease their disadvantages both individually and collectively as a
group. This is significant for their visibility in society. These findings have significant implications not only for YWD but also for the way they are viewed and provided for in society. In the next and final chapter, I draw conclusions and highlight the implications of the research.
Chapter 9: Reflections and Conclusions

As illustrated in chapter one, I position the study in the wider context of social justice and responses to disability within the education system in Kenya. In this chapter, I offer some final thoughts on the research and the limitations of the study and suggest areas for further exploration.

9.1 General overview

This study addresses an important gap in the literature on YWD, their experiences of HE and social media in Kenya and other countries with similar policy, technology and education system. It has helped make visible this particular group of youth who, because they are not identified in other studies, remain invisible and, thus, forgotten. The study lays down the foundation for further studies and raises issues for consideration by those responsible for educational policy and practitioners who work with YWD in educational settings.

Positioning the study within the CA framework of assessment has enabled a deep understanding of the varied ways that YWD use and experience social media. For example, social media is seen as a tool to develop agency, used by YWD exactly as any of their non-disabled peers use it, or used as an enabler to push boundaries so that the YWD are able to pursue valued beings/doings which have previously been inaccessible because of their individual conditions being restricted by socially constructed barriers.

The use of the CA has revealed the value of online spaces in enabling the voice of YWD: YWD are equals in terms of their ability to participate online. Unlike offline spaces, where there can be ‘political’ interference and YWD can be silenced or ignored, in online spaces, YWD can exercise their agency and articulate their views on matters that are important to them, including even questioning negative practices and false assumptions made about them. In this sense, we see them taking control themselves and not waiting for others to advocate on their behalf. This way they are seen to fracture the predominant disability stereotypes that perceive YWD as incapable and needing help to manage their lives. The exercise of individual agency is something that is ignored in other models of disability.

Data in chapter 6 has highlighted how some YWD were forced to adapt their choices in terms of secondary school placement because the current education provision fails to
provide for their educational needs in all schools despite the existing policies. The study has shown how the capabilities gained through exposure to social media, gave YWD the confidence to challenge such discriminatory practices. Had these capabilities been developed during their early years of schooling, rather than on entry to HE, the participants in this study (and many others who are currently being denied opportunities) would have enjoyed a very different educational trajectory.

The understanding of inequality derived from the CA as shown here is especially important in the context of an unequal education system and in the attempt to enhance the capabilities of YWD and other marginalised groups who experience restricted choices, often because of the prevailing social context (structure). Provision of educational resources, such as placement and accommodation at the university, is, by itself, insufficient to ensure a just HE system. Rather, consideration should be given to the relationship between these resources and the ability of YWD to convert them into valued capabilities from where they then make meaningful choices.

The study has relevance beyond Kenya, and other countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, for research built around the capabilities’ paradigm. It shows not only social media engagement as a space and process in which identities are constructed and/ reconstructed within a network of relationships but also the importance of a participatory approach to understanding the role this engagement plays in shaping people’s lives, particularly those that are potentially vulnerable.

The conduct of the study

In terms of methodology, the participatory approach proved appropriate and harmonised with the tenets of the CA. My methodology can be replicated in various contexts as long as researchers acknowledge the agency of co-researchers and are flexible to listen and respond to their voice and accommodate their needs. My research questions, though applied to a specific time and place, were open-ended and fluid: they can thus be applied elsewhere even though what is lived experience now will not be the same in five years’ time in the same (changed) context or any other.
9.2 Looking forward

9.2.1 Process and approaches to policy.

Although current legislation in Kenya has eased the life of many YWD, there are still significant issues to be addressed. The study has shown that conceptions and enactment of policy fail to acknowledge that these are first and foremost young people - with similar needs, agency and aspirations as other young people without disabilities. A significant concern of the CA is ‘judging institutions according to whether or not they enable human beings - in all their complexity and diversity - to flourish’ (Alkire, 2002, p. 17). If the government aims to ensure full inclusion of all students in HE — in all their complexity and diversity — as articulated in the existing policies (chapter 2), then it is necessary that it provides the essential support that individual YWD need to ensure they participate in HE equally together with their non-disabled peers and actualise their aspirations in life. If these youths’ freedoms are not enabled, it can be argued that the government is not fully implementing its stated policy and is perpetuating the existing inequality.

Affirmative Action as currently provided in policy is beneficial but limited. As data here has shown, it is only helpful in some aspects of YWD lives and in a context in which there is prior disadvantage for YWD in the education system. Once they have access to similar choices as their non-disabled peers earlier in the education system, so that they are able to apply for HE on an equal footing, then affirmative action will become redundant. However, it is likely that affirmative action will be necessary until the changes of practice are fully implemented throughout the education system.

The study has shown that YWD’s use of social media suggest that change in current policies and practice in ICT in education would be timely. As the digital age advances and people continue to use social media and other digital technologies to enhance their ability to lead the kind of lives they deem valuable, Kenya’s education sector is one area where there is potential to support YWD to access new freedoms to participate equally with their non-disabled peers. As the data here has shown, through their activities on social media, YWD appear highly motivated and agentive and, from their ability to actualise things online, they then are able to shift boundaries even in some offline spaces. Most of these YWD were able to do this following their transition into HE, where they had easy access to social media. It should be remembered that the participants in this research were a very small sample of a bigger population, many of whom do not have the opportunity to make
the transition to HE. There would therefore seem to be a need to consider ways in which use of digital media and ICTs in schools can be encouraged. While there are risks in allowing the use of these media in schools, particularly with regards to safety and discipline issues of students, equally, when used effectively and safely, these media can be beneficial. For example, social media facilitates the development of communities of practice and the ensuing mentoring relationships which, in turn help YWD gain visibility in offline spaces that is crucial for their meaningful participation in life post HE.

In addition, whilst the study acknowledges the importance of inclusive education, the role of special schools in the lives of some YWD need consideration. Data in this study has shown that some special schools were instrumental in building communities of support for YWD and many of these youth have followed these practices with each other in HE. The special schools attended by participants in this study seemed particularly adept at giving confidence to their students and enabling them to apply for HE, thereby supporting their participation in society. There are messages to be learnt here for all inclusive schools, or those that aim to be inclusive, and there is scope for dialogue so that, for example, inclusive schools could learn about the culture and practices in special schools that can be applied in inclusive settings to ensure they enable the educational progression of YWD and other marginalised groups. Participants in this study particularly mentioned the importance of the positive attitudes and approaches of teachers in special schools and the way in which these had been instrumental in enabling these youth actualise their educational goals. This is something that teachers and administrators in inclusive settings could learn from to ensure they are able to support YWD participate in education equally with their non-disabled peers in these settings.

The need to listen to voices of different students in education

With regards to the notion of democracy, by using the CA as a framework for re-thinking policy formulations around YWD, this research has provided insights on the need to acknowledge and reflect on the needs of different groups; this is a significant feature of the literature on capabilities, inclusion and social justice. In particular, within University A and C, the study has highlighted a mismatch between provision (e.g. accommodation) and what is valued by YWD. The CA recognises the agency of YWD and their ability to make choices and thereby silences the charity model, which assumes that YWD and other marginalised groups should be grateful and ‘value’ what is provided for them. Whilst it is observable that some compromises have to be made because of resource limitations with
regards to adapting the rooms, yet the voice of YWD needs to be incorporated in decision-making about the use of what resources are available.

**Personal reflections**

In reflecting on my personal journey as a researcher, my learning has advanced thanks to the various opportunities I have had access to both individually and as a member of the larger research community within and outside the OU. I have benefitted from mentorship through supervision meetings and individual conversations with my supervisors and other senior academic colleagues, fieldwork, discussions with fellow PhD students, seminars and workshops within WELS, DPP and SRA, conferences and other networks, all of which have challenged me to think critically and reflect on my decisions. These activities, together with input from my previous knowledge and experience as a practitioner, have informed the choices that I have made in the process of researching and writing this thesis as demonstrated in each of the nine chapters.

Learning about the significance of theories and frameworks of analysis in research and other areas of development has been helpful in many ways. In particular, the use of CA has given me confidence with regards to having the right terminology to use. Although I was aware of the social injustices that YWD experience within the education system, I did not have the tools to a) understand the injustices and b) investigate them to gain a deeper understanding of what was going on. As I look beyond my time of doctoral study, I am now able to understand the situation and analyse issues/contexts and to shape responses in ways which pay proper attention to the needs, rights and aspirations of YWD and advise policy-makers and practitioners at different levels.

**9.2.2 Areas of further research**

I draw attention to the fact that this study focused on a small educationally elite group of YWD who, despite the various challenges observed, have successfully negotiated the transition to HE. Being in HE is a significant achievement for these YWD and the opportunities and networks they have access to within this setting highly shapes their activities on social media. However, most YWD remain educationally marginalised, and many leave education after primary school, as shown in chapter 2. Adapting this methodology with YWD who are not in HE could provide deep insights into how social media can influence their agency and participation in their day to day lives in society with others.
Related to the above is the need to understand transitions for YWD beyond the current discourse of education. As the study has shown, there is currently limited research on the experiences of YWD on social media outside education, so it is not possible to tell what capabilities can be enabled or not. It would be useful to undertake a longitudinal study to follow them through transitions beyond HE and investigate their experiences with social media in the next stage of their lives so as to understand the extent to which it continues to enable their capabilities and their participation in society.

In conclusion, coming soon after the Global Disability Summit held in July 2018 in London, this study is timely as it contributes to current issues in education and international development particularly with regards to disability inclusion and agency of YWD. It provides empirical evidence to the debates on the use of ICTs and other internet services to support the full inclusion of YWD in education and other aspects of development in society: Currently this debate is limited to provision of assistive technological aids. The findings also contribute to debates on the need to acknowledge YWD agency and provide them with “…relevant skills for employment, decent jobs and enterpreuership” as specified in target 4.4 in the SDGs (UNESCO, 2015). In a world where social media and other digital technologies have become a regular part of most youths’ lives as shown in chapter 3, it is vital to focus on the choices they are making on how they are living their lives. Like other global youth, YWD are attracted to new technological inventions for learning, earning and communication as a way of attaining life chances (Christiansen et al., 2006). Through social media and other new technologies, the possibilities of YWD are enhanced and in turn this gives them opportunity to pursue and actualise their goals and improve their life with greater ease as articulated by Mtawala:

You know this Facebook is our voice here in… if they refuse to act, then we shout on Facebook, you know there, nobody will shut you down…This is where we throw our stones, it is our (….) Road...this is where we make our voices heard (Mtawala, SMM, 2017).
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Appendices

Appendix 1: HREC Approval

From Dr Louise Westmarland
Chair, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee
Email louise.westmarland@open.ac.uk

To Alice Gathoni WELS/CREET

Subject The lived experiences of social media use by youth with disabilities in Higher education in Kenya.

Memorandum

HREC Ref HREC 2016 2407 Gathoni WELS/CREET
This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Please note the following:

1. You are responsible for notifying the HREC immediately of any information received by you, or of which you become aware which would cast doubt on, or alter, any information contained in the original application, or a later amendment which would raise questions about the safety and/or continued conduct of the research.

2. It is essential that any proposed amendments to the research are sent to the HREC for review, so they can be recorded and a favourable opinion given prior to any changes being implemented (except only in cases of emergency when the welfare of the participant or researcher is may be effected).

3. You are authorised to present this memorandum to outside bodies such as NHS Research Ethics Committees in support of any application for future research clearance. Also, where there is an external ethics review, a copy of the application and outcome should be sent to the HREC.
4. OU research ethics review procedures are fully compliant with the majority of grant awarding bodies and their frameworks for research ethics.

5. At the conclusion of your project, by the date stated in your application, you are required to provide the Committee with a final report to reflect how the project has progressed, and importantly whether any ethics issues arose and how they were dealt with. A copy of the final report template can be found on the research ethics website - http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research/human-researchethics-full-review-process-and-proforma#final report.

Kind regards,

Dr Louise Westmarland

Chair OU HREC http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/

The Open University is incorporated by Royal Charter (number RC 000391), an exempt charity in England & Wales and a charity registered in Scotland (number SC 038302)
Appendix 2: NACOSTI Research Permit
Appendix3: Informed Consent

Gathoni Alice
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes, UK
MK 7 6AA

Dear-----------------------------------

Request for your participation in research

Habari, my name is Gathoni Alice. I am a PhD student at the Open University in the UK. I am currently undertaking a research whose purpose is to understand the experiences of social media use by youth with disabilities in Higher Education in Kenya. The study will focus on two research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of social media use by youth with disabilities in Higher education in Kenya?

2. How does activity on social media influence youth with disabilities’ awareness of present and future possibilities of ways of being in the world?
I am inviting you to participate in this study:

**What will be involved?**

To help me learn about your experiences of social media use, I will be conducting:

a) A social media map activity,

b) Life History Interview

c) Self-directed photography activity- All these will take place between February and April 2017

d) Closed online discussion group - this will take place later in the years as discussed below.

The first two activities will take around 60 to 90 minutes each. The Photography will take place over a period of one week and the online group later in the year (around August). The activities will take place in open places where you are comfortable within your campus at a date and time that is convenient for you:

- The social mapping will involve you sketching a map about your social media networks - the people, places, things and institutions that have impacted your life and whether this is positive or negative.

- The life History Interview, you will share about your life in the past, present and how you envision it in the future. With your permission, I would like to audio-record your sharing for easier recall of all information later during analysis. I understand that sharing your life story may cause you distress. Please feel free to let me know if you do not wish to continue. If you wish to speak to a counsellor within the University, I have some contact details which you can call for professional help.

- In the photography project, I will give a disposable camera and request that you take pictures of what social media means to you. You will take the photos for one week after which I will liaise with you so that I can go and process the pictures. I will return all them to you and you will then decide which ones you want to share with me. For the photos that you share, you will caption them giving a summary of what they mean to you.
Later in the year, I will set a closed online group in a social media platform that is common to all of you who will be taking part in the study. I will then email you themes that will have emerged from our interviews with you. You will look at them and email me your feedback. On the forum, I will share the general themes emerging from my analysis for you to review as a group and then feedback me with your comments which I will use in the writing of the final thesis.

**Confidentiality**

Your participation will be treated in strict confidentiality in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). No personal information will be passed to anyone. However, my supervisors will have access to the information for purposes of support and help during the study. When I write the report findings, from this study, no individual will be identified in the published results of the research. When I use any photos which can identify you, they will be blurred. In addition, during the online group discussion, I request you to respect the confidentiality of the group members and not share any of their personal information or contributions to the discussion with anyone outside the group.

**What happens now?**

I will contact you in the next few weeks by mobile to confirm if you would like to volunteer in the study. If your prefer not to be contacted about this research, please call/text/email me using the contacts given below and I will not contact you again. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

**Further questions?**

If you have any other questions about the study, I will be happy to answer them. Please contact me. Name: Mobile:

**Concerns?**

If you have any concerns about the study, please contact my supervisor below

Name:
Appendix 4: Sample of colour coding

Rukia’s transcription 1a

Colour coding: Key

a) **Yellow** = Close relationships - family & close friends. **how it feels** = sense of belonging/without fear of being judged. **Enablers of capabilities**. How do they enable? = (e.g. don’t judge me, understand me, push me, listen to me, we chat, revise together, hang out, lazy around etc)

b) **Red** = Challenges/inhibitors of capabilities **How?** (being judged/stigma/not accepted/stairs/not accessible/potholes/refusing to cooperate in group…)

c) **Blue** = conversion factors = (role models, scholarships, wheelchair, technology in general, laptop/ WiFi, social media, supportive friends)

d) **Pink** = Individual agency (very determined, positive, participates fully, pushes self in the potholed road, speaks out, create awareness, etc).

e) **Green** = Specific actions/ words & statements used to show e.g. closeness of relationship or stereotypes (for us there are no rules, it feels good, share our lives etc)

Administrative issues……………….…………………………………………………………………………………………………………………………

………………………………………………………………………

Me: So, let’s talk about your social media map now that you are done.

Rukia: I communicate with my parents everyday using phone calls. But not with social media. It is only my sister whom I communicate with through Facebook and not every often. She is rarely on FB but when either of us post something on FB we will comment.

Me: So, although you don’t use social media mostly with family, you said that you communicate with them as they are important for you as a student here at the Uni? How are they important?
Rukia: My family gives me a sense of belonging. It is where I belong. It is where I will not be judged, it’s where I will air my needs and they will be met without feeling like I am a burden to anyone! Yah.. It’s where we have that you know…strong bond.

Me: You mentioned that this is where you will not be judged. What do you mean?

Rukia: Well, not that they will tolerate any nonsense but that is a place where I can be me without fear. Even if I have done anything wrong, bado wewe ni wetu, you know, not like other people out here in the society…eee it is the first place I run to if I have any good news or a problem.

Me: Now let me ask, do you think that is a place that you are comfortable because of your disability, is that what you meant?

Rukia: Yah..exactly. You know in my family, it is not like I have a disability you know. I am just their child, Rukia, they are used to me. Many times I even forget I have a disability when I am home with my family despite the many challenges. They are used to me. They understand me, they will not ask me to do things when they know I can’t access certain places.

Me: Good, okay. Now on you map, I see you have also captured friends on your map. Tell me, who are they? And how do you know them

Rukia: These are just friends, some were my former schoolmates in (...), some we were in the same scholarship, I told you I was a wings to fly scholar right? Some are friends I have met through my other friends and a few that I have met here in (...).

Me: So, you have combined that, all of them right.

Rukia: I am thinking maybe I should have put them in different branches. So, I have 3 branches now. Former classmates, scholarship friends, current friends yah….

Me: So, let's talk about these former classmates?

Rukia: Yes, former classmates in (...). In (...), I met good friends whom I am still in touch with even now. Some are teachers and others just former students like me.

Me: Now, with these, how do you stay in touch?

Rukia: Mostly through Facebook, WhatsApp and Messenger.
Me: Do you have any who studies with you here?

Rukia: The ones that are here are kina Kibe, I don’t know whether you know them. But we keep in touch both on social media and I also meet them in the campus.

Me: So how often do you keep in touch?

Rukia: It is not every day, but we keep in touch like 3 days a week. **Or sometimes, when we are online, you see someone, you just start a conversation. There are no rules you know.**

Me: And generally, what do you share?

Rukia: Just **catching up** on one another. like where did you go, what are you doing? Are you in Uni, what is happening there, what is happening here at (...), you know such stuff..

Me: How do you feel when you communicate with someone who is so far away and yet share info so easily?

Rukia: You know, **I think generally technology has done…can I say a miracle?** In that sense yes. Because **it feels like you are with that person and somehow you feel that the friendship never ended** after you finished high school. **And it feels good** because for friendships and relationships, communication is very important. So, if we keep communicating, it **means that our friendship is still growing** yah… The **connection is still there.** Because if I don’t communicate, they will start looking for me on Facebook, kwani uko wapi, kwani kuna shida ama ulibadilika ama? They will ask where I am. **It feels like tuko pamoja, even when we can’t meet.** That **sense of connection**…

Me: And is that just Facebook or?
Appendix 5: Map of Kenya Counties

Source: https://softkenya.com/county/