Abstract

Young urban Gambians frequent cybercafés largely to use the Internet as a way to orchestrate encounters with foreigners as part of a strategy of accumulating economic capital. This form of ‘hustling’ is part of a poverty reduction strategy that is generally conducted through the appropriation of new technologies. This form of ICT use is in some disjuncture with the developmental theories of ICTs. Most significantly, such theories foreground use of the internet to meet information needs whereas the users in this study engage in the contextual and non-developmental use ICTs.

Drawing on data collected from ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2013 and 2014 in Brikama, the Gambia, where internet use in cybercafés has rapidly grown over the past two decades, I use the cases ‘chanters’ (cyber hustlers) to shed light on the life-trajectories of young marginalised urban Gambians. In particular, I examine the narratives of young Gambians who engage in internet mediated encounters with foreigners as a livelihood strategy. The study explores the income generating strategies employed by the youths through these encounters and the opportunities it provides for them and their families. It suggest that, young urban Gambians accumulate wealth by employing various methods and ruses in their interactions with toubabs (white westerners) through internet-mediated encounters.

Keywords: chanters, ICT, toubabs
Introduction

A white, dirty curtain separates the small room at the back of the cybercafé from the main hall. Inside the room, a young man, whom I will call Bigger¹, lies down on a mattress. Looking feeble and struggling to get the words out of his mouth, he feigns helplessness and lets the doctor do the talking for him. A bandage with what seems like blood seething through was tied around his head. His guise tells anybody who looks at him that he only has a few hours to live. His muscular body is accentuated by a dirty conspicuous vest and similarly dirty shorts. His slippers struggle to stay on his dusty feet. Two other people, one wearing a white gown and Kalilu, one of the café managers were standing over him. A laptop with a webcam on top of the screen was placed on a small table close to the mattress. From where I was standing, I could see the face of a white man with long hair tied at the back talking to the man in the gown. He looked worried. His last words before he disappeared offline were “Okay, let me rush to the Western Union”.

The story that follows this scene characterises the techniques and strategies that a group of young men and women employ to make money from their interactions with the toubabs (white westerners) they establish relationships with online. This study considers nonelite, urban youth such as Biggar make use of accumulative opportunities provided by the Internet to achieve socio-economic advancement. Specifically, this study explores the hustling strategies of a group of young people who attempt to fulfil their aspirations of social and economic advancement by establishing online encounters with foreigners, mostly in cybercafés. Deeply immersed in the chat rooms that appeared on their screens and not particularly perturbed by the humid and muggy environment of the cybercafé, young Gambians appropriate the Internet in ways that supported their income generation and livelihood strategies. This type of ICT use is locally associated with ‘online hustling’ (Wyche, Forte and schoenebeck, 2013). Although ‘hustling’ is a comprehensive term used to describe both criminal and noncriminal economic activities of an increasing number of urban youth (Carmichael, 1975), in the Gambia, the term has been used to describe the livelihood strategies and informal income generating activities of young people.

¹ Pseudonyms have been used throughout to protect the identity of my interlocutors
The proliferation of public access to the internet (cybercafés in particular) has provided livelihood opportunities for many youths in urban and peri-urban areas of most developing countries. In the Gambia, a country lying in the westernmost part of Africa, chronic unemployment and lack of economic opportunities have encouraged young people to make a living through internet related activities by adopting various strategies in the pursuit of viable livelihoods in response to their socio-economic constraints. This type of contextual and ‘non-development’ (Molony, 2008) uses of ICTs, mostly by young people is in disjuncture with the dominant theories of ‘ICTs for development’ (Avgerou, 2010) which adopt a narrow development lens of technology use. These theories tend to miss the ingenious strategies marginal populations use to instate technologies into their everyday lives (Wahid et al., 2006).

Be that as it may, the advent of the Internet in the Gambia, which can mostly be accessed in cybercafés, provided opportunities for many unemployed urban youths. Lacking the appropriate education and skills to acquire formal employment and unable to migrate to the West due to stringent visa restrictions, they spend their time in cybercafés employing various tricks to access and make money from toumbabs by using the Internet.

The young people who engage in online hustling activities use specific language to describe themselves and their activities. They refer to themselves as ‘chanters’ and their activities as ‘chanting’. The toumbabs they establish online relationships with are generally referred to as ‘contacts’. Contacts are further categorised into “Real contacts” and “Friends”. Real contacts are those that send them money and “friends” are those that they are in touch with but do not send them money. Chanters can have as many as 1,000 online ‘friends’ but only two, three or four “real contacts”. Although all ‘real contacts’ start as ‘friends’, chanters will delete those friends who do not make this transformation from their friendship list as they are regarded as “time wasters”. My interlocutors describe chanting as an activity that involves “making friends on the Internet with the aim of establishing a relationship that has economic and material benefits”. As Mighty Dre, a key interlocutor told me: ‘chanting is searching for toumbabs on the Internet and sweet talking them into helping you. We tell them things that will please them to get them to give us money’.

In what will follow, I first seek to describe the spaces where chanters operate. I then introduce the main chanters whose life histories make up
this ethnography. I then explore their itineraries of accumulation by describing the strategies they employ to access and establish relationships with *toubabs* online and the techniques they use to make money from them.

**Research Methodology**

The accounts and stories of the hustlers in this ethnography culminated from eight months of fieldwork in the Gambia. The research primarily took place in Brikama, a peri-urban town lying south of The Gambia’s capital Banjul. In collecting data, I used classic ethnographic methods of direct observation and open-ended, unstructured interviews. From September 2013 to May 2014, I spent an average of three to five hours per day, three to four days a week, observing, interviewing and interacting with chanters.

Bryman (2008) observes that one of the key and yet most difficult steps in ethnographic research is negotiating and gaining access to the setting relevant to the research and the informants. Gaining entry into hard to reach populations, such as the chanters in this study, presents a host of challenges for researchers (Ibid). Often the researcher must rely on informants to provide key information about the population as well as providing introduction to members. To access participants, I used the services of a few gatekeepers I was in contact with through local networks. These gatekeepers did not only provide me access but also introduced me to many hustlers who showed their willingness to be interviewed. These hustlers also introduced me to their friends in their network. This snowball approach proved to be extremely pragmatic in generating a reservoir of respondents.

Through these networks, I was able to conduct 35 interviews with young people who engage in chanting. Fifteen of these were extensive in-depth life history interviews with six chanters. Interviews were also done with people who frequented cybercafés. These generally fell into one of three main categories: the cybercafé owners, the operators they employ and the cybercafé users. The latter, however, made up the bulk of my respondents.

Most of the observations of the activities of chanters took place at the AON and GAMTEL cybercafés. Issues of access and the representative nature of these cafes determined this decision. The observations were carried out both inside the café and in its outer spaces.
and surroundings. Inside the cybercafés, I spent hours observing how hustlers use the Internet to make money. My observations were mainly focussed on the websites they used, how they communicate with *toubabs*, how they interacted among themselves and with the café managers and the tricks they employed to make money.

**Setting the Scene: AON and GAMTEL**

Recent studies on the spatial distribution of cybercafés in developing countries indicate a strong presence in peri-urban settings (Rangaswamy, 2008; Gomez, 2012). It is therefore no wonder that Brikamahas experienced a dramatic growth of cybercafé businesses over the past few years. The number of cybercafés has mushroomed from just one in 2005 to 38 in 2013. Anyone visiting the town will not have difficulty in finding a cybercafé which can either be found on the main Brikama highway or on residential street corners. From Nyambai to Kembuje (the areas where Brikama starts and ends), cyber cafes are clustered in close proximity to each other.

With the exception of the Gambia Telecommunications Company Limited (GAMTEL), a government owned cybercafé; the cybercafés in Brikama are privately owned and located within residential buildings. This indicates the growing use and adoption of technology outside of development interventions. It is in these privately owned cybercafés that chanters start hustling before moving their operations to GAMTEL as they provide comparatively cheaper connection rates. The cybercafés in Brikama are always busy, with peak patronage in the late afternoon and evening. The sizes of the cafes range from those with only just 5 computer terminals to one café (GAMTEL) with 29 terminals. Mostly accommodated in small rooms initially built to be rented out as local shops (or *bitiques* as they are locally known), the cybercafés are normally small with very poor ventilation. The majority of the cybercafés lack proper windows, making the rooms dark and stuffy. It is in these cybercafés that I spent time observing and talking to chanters.

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2 GAMTEL is the principal telecommunications company of the Gambia.

3 Borrowed from the French meaning boutique.
AON: “IT, Electronics and Beauty Solutions”

The cybercafés in Brikama are named after their owners (for example Bas Internet Café, named after the owner Bas) or a famous landmark adjacent to it (for example FMB Internet Café named after the community Radio FM Brikama or Montego Bay Internet Café, named after the popular Montego Bay mini market to which it is adjacent) or global buzzwords (for example, “Global Links”, “IT Solutions” or “Millennium” Internet cafes). The name given to the AON cybercafé is unique in this regard. A family run business, it is overseen and managed by Kemo, the second son in a family of twelve. It has nine PCs and has been in operation for almost three years. It is open seven days a week from 9 am until midnight.

The great majority of AON’s customers are young students. They usually come either before or after school as evident by their uniforms. Some spend the whole day in the café in their uniforms. These young students, like those found in Indian cybercafés (Rangaswamy, 2007), enjoy the informal ambience of the café and its relatively unconstrained rules about Internet browsing. This is not surprising given the fact that Burrell finds cybercafés ‘appealing spaces’ for young people to escape the surveillance of authority (Burrell, 2012: 43).

The AON is in the middle of a small nondescript residential street. A blackboard advertising the services (printing, scanning, photocopying and browsing) it offers and the accessories available for sale (laptops, hard drives, webcams, phones, earphones and pen drives) is placed outside the café. An A4 size paper, displaying the prices for services, is pasted on the glass door, which serves as the main entrance. Browsing at the AON costs D10 for 60 minutes or D5 for 30 minutes. Customers who buy two or more hours of browsing time receive an extra 30 minutes for free. Similar to cybercafés in other African contexts (see Smith, 2008; Steiner, 2011; Burrell, 2012), no cold drinks or coffee are available for sale. Burrell (2012: 28) therefore argues that referring to facilities that provide public access to ICT in developing countries as cybercafés is generally a misnomer.

The veranda of the AON serves as a waiting area for customers. However, the two benches placed on the veranda are not only used for this purpose as non-customers, mostly neighbours and Alkali’s acquaintances, hang around to chat and drink attaya. This form of socialisation found in Gambian cybercafés serves as a point of contrast
to what has been reported in Accra’s cybercafés (Burrell, 2012) where a limited amount of sociability occurs. For example, Smith (2008) observes that although the most popular cybercafés in the towns of Umuahia and Owerri in Nigeria serve as meeting points for young people, the lack of sitting spaces except for the computer terminals discourages any form of social interaction.

The AON café itself is a small room not more than 6m x 4m and PCs are placed on tables in an integrated fashion. The seating configuration inside the AON leaves no room for extra seating inside the café, making social interactions less than ideal. In addition, and similar to most privately owned cybercafés in Brikama, this arrangement does not ensure private browsing. Alkali’s own desk, which consists of a laptop, a printer/photocopier and a scanner, is placed in a small corner inside the café. Internet connections at the AON can be so painfully slow that one wonders why customers do not go elsewhere. It turns out that the situation is as bad if not worse in other cybercafés, except GAMTEL.

The AON is similar to other privately owned cybercafés in terms of their raison d’être. The cybercafés are either run as a family business to provide basic subsistence for the family or owned by a person, normally a civil servant, who opens it as a side business to complement their salary. Situated in residential buildings, they are all similar in layout, price, and clientele. Their interiors are modest and minimal in décor. Although they bear some resemblance to the cybercafés in Accra (Burrell, 2012), they deviate from past studies that have focused on the rich material culture and spatial configuration of cybercafés in Western countries (Wakeford 1999, 2003; Laegran and Stewart 2003). The cybercafés in Brikama also share the same challenges, prominent among which is erratic electricity supplies and poor Internet connections and competition from GAMTEL.

**GAMTEL: “Where big things happen”**

Unlike the AON and other privately owned cybercafés, GAMTEL is at a different level in terms of comfort and general technical provisions. With round-the-clock electricity (the facility has a big generator that automatically starts up in power cuts) and a high speed Internet connection, it is a government run cybercafé. It is a state company, charged with the task of overseeing the provision of telecommunications and Internet services in the country. In accordance with its aim to
provide Internet access to every Gambian, GAMTEL runs cybercafés in different towns in the country, according to the GAMTEL regional director in Brikama. Among these, the Brikama GAMTEL cybercafé is the biggest with 29 PCs.

GAMTEL is the hub for chanting activities in Brikama. It has a reputation as being the cybercafé where young people go to establish online relationships to make money. This reputation has made many avoid going to GAMTEL lest they be associated with chanters. The extent of this was illustrated by a warning from an acquaintance who cautioned me “be careful before they mistake you for one of the GAMTEL boys” when I told him I was going to GAMTEL.

The GAMTEL cybercafé is situated on a busy road linking the market and the car park. With many shops and street hustlers selling mobile phone top ups, SIM cards, mobile phone accessories, peanuts, fruits and food, the immediate surroundings are always intense with activity. The sound of music (Mabalax, Reggae or Zouk) emanates from an adjacent recording studio that sells CDs and audio cassettes. Wooden benches are placed outside the recording studio under a neem tree. Here, people either sit to pass time or to wait for a vehicle that will take them to their destination. Most of my conversations with chanters took place under this tree on the wooden benches where they normally sit either to wait for online appointments or just to hang around.

The building of the GAMTEL cybercafé is nestled in between the post office and a Western Union outlet. Chanters gain a lot from this coincidental planning, as we shall see later in this chapter. Unlike the smaller cafes, GAMTEL boasts a more sophisticated décor, with modern flats screens and new computers. The seating arrangements also ensure some modicum of private browsing as workstations are partitioned by thick piece of cardboards. However, a glance from a position behind the customers enables anybody inside the cafe to see what the customers are doing online. The manager’s desk is positioned in a way that they have full view of the activities taking place inside the café. A PC, a scanner and a printer are placed on the desk. A long wooden bench is situated near the manager’s desk for waiting customers. Notices are plastered on the concrete pillars that serve as anchors for the building. These notices include the browsing tariffs (the cost of browsing in GAMTEL is D12 for a 30 minute session compared to AON’s D5) and the general rules and regulations such as “only one person to a PC”. This rule, however, is
almost always flouted as it is difficult to enforce due to new users needing someone to sit near them to teach or help them.

“20 minutes for PC 25”: The Ambiance

The social ambience of GAMTEL on a normal day is reminiscent of activities in a busy stock exchange. The majority of customers are glued to their screens chatting with online partners through Skype using headsets. Web cams are positioned on top of the computer screens to facilitate face-to-face interactions. Multiple conversation windows intermittently flash on their screens. The sounds of keyboards, pings from instant messages and purrs of conversation are clearly audible. Occasional shouts of “manager 20 minutes for PC 25”, for example, can be heard from customers wishing to extend their browsing sessions. GAMTEL is normally busiest between 6 pm and 9 pm when both students and workers arrive. It can sometimes be difficult, if not impossible, to get access to a PC during these times. To avoid finding themselves in such situations, customers who can afford it either buy a full day’s session or bring their own laptops that they connect to GAMTEL’s Wi-Fi by paying the prescribed browsing fee.

The social ambience at GAMTEL extends to its outer space. At any point in time, around 100 to 150 people will be occupying these spaces, just hanging about waiting for free PCs or socialising. However, social events can see these numbers reduce noticeably. For example, GAMTEL is almost empty during feasts like Tobaski and Koriteh. GAMTEL is also normally quiet during big football games in the English Premier League, UEFA Champions League and the nawetaan as most chanters will congregate at video clubs or at the box bar mini stadium to watch football.

The Gamtel Boys

I started chanting at GAMTEL and that was about eight years ago. Many people have made it here. Some have gone to Europe and some have built houses, bought cars and started their own businesses. Big things happen here. That is the why the place is popular today for chanting. – Omar, a chanter.

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4 Public holidays in celebration of Islamic festivals.
5 Football tournament played during the rainy season.
The chanters who normally ply their trade in GAMTEL are locally known as the “GAMTEL boys”. The archetypal GAMTEL boy is in his early twenties. He normally spends the whole day in GAMTEL or around its vicinity and buys on average four hours browsing time a day and spends on average D1600 a month, which he can easily afford.

His style of dress and his general comportment is determined by his earning capacity. He dresses modestly before making his first money but abandons these clothes for more expensive and colourful clothes once money starts coming in. He loves football and is a fan of one of the best teams in Europe, donning replica jerseys on match days. He wears expensive Nike trainers and American baseball caps and his jeans are drawn down in a “criss-cross” style exposing his underwear. He wears gold plated or silver earrings and huge necklaces with an assortment of finger rings. He possesses and likes to display expensive gadgets like his iPhone or iPad. These items are sent to him from abroad by his toubab contact and he collects them from the local post office adjacent to GAMTEL.

His style of dress and his general comportment is also symbolic of his success. This is measured by the amount of toubab contacts he has and how much money he receives from them. His success is also translated into the plane tickets he buys to send his parents to the pilgrimage in Mecca, the new house he is building and the car he drives. This guarantees him upward mobility and status in society as his perceived fortune and social transformation will be much talked about. He is popular and unknown people from far and wide will come to seek financial assistance from him.

“You have to be a good liar to become a good chanter”: Chanters and the Tricks of their Trade

The Chanters
The chanters whose life histories account for this ethnography do not constitute a homogenous group in terms of the specific activities they engage in, their experiences and their professional backgrounds. For example, and in addition to Biggar who we have already met in the introductory vignette, we have Mr. Jallow, a 27 year old primary school teacher. Skinny and tall, he is the first son of a polygamous family of eight. His father is a retired janitor and his mother is a house wife.
Mighty Dre has just turned twenty one years old, and has been hustling since he was nineteen. A school dropout, he calls himself a ‘full time chanter’. Popular among his peers for his ability to easily get women to fall in love with him due to his handsome looks and charming personality, he has made a lot of money through chanting. Dre, as he is fondly called, drives a nice BMW and has built a house for his parents in the suburbs of Brikama. He however spends his money living an ostentatious lifestyle with a penchant for girls and partying. Encouraged into chanting by his friends two years ago, he told me:

I started chanting at GAMTEL. My friend whose toubab contact was sending him a lot of money convinced me to get into it. I also saw my mates taking care of themselves and their families so I decided to chant and try my luck. I have been chanting for two years. I normally target old women of 50 and over. I have a white old lady friend I called mama. She is from Sweden. She is 52. I have another real contact in Germany who helps me a lot.

Binta is unique in that she is one of only a few female chanters in Brikama. She is eighteen years old and has never been to school. From a very poor family, her mother sells fruit and vegetables at the Brikama market. I got to know Binta at the AON where she normally goes to communicate with John her American boyfriend. Her mother, a middle-aged lady with a fair complexion, usually accompanies her to the cybercafés when she is not selling at the market. She normally sits behind Binta while she has Skype conversations with John.

Buba is a lean, baby-faced young boy. He is eighteen years of age. He is usually modestly but neatly dressed. His enthusiastic smiles conceal a sadness caused by his very poor background. He started coming to GAMTEL three years ago after dropping out of school. He told me that he started chanting to look for sponsors who would pay for his education so he can go back to school.

“Friends and Real Contacts”: The Accumulation of Friends

To fully appreciate the intricacies of a chanter’s money making tricks, we first need to explore how they are introduced to chanting, by whom, the techniques they are taught and how they initiate contact with toubabs. Calhoun’s (1992) assertion that male hustlers are introduced to street prostitution through “peer introduction” and/or “situational discovery” is consistent with my findings on Gambian youth’s introduction to
chanting. The majority of my interlocutors confirmed that they were introduced to chanting through their association with a friend and/or family member who is already an established chanter. A few indicated that they learnt about chanting by chance. Mighty Dre and Mr. Jallow, for example, illustrate these situations. They started going to cybercafés for other purposes such as searching for universities abroad.

The first thing chanters are taught by those who introduce them to chanting is the basic use of a PC. This includes the ability to use the keyboard, the mouse and to open email and social networking accounts. The would-be chanter is also given instructions on how to send friendship requests and tips to ensure that the potential friends are genuine. The chanter is also briefed on the general rules of engagement with the toubab. Would-be chanters are also exposed to some general tricks they can employ to make money, although these are improvised as the chanter becomes familiar with the trade. Once these skills have been mastered, the chanter is left on his own to create Hotmail, Yahoo or Gmail email accounts.

Accounts are created on all the above sites using different usernames and passwords. The email accounts are then used to sign up and open accounts on social networking sites. The principal sites used are Facebook, Tagged, Moco Space, Gay Romeo and Bull Chat. The first three are general social networking sites, while the latter two are exclusively gay social networking sites where gay and bisexual men meet to network, send instant messages and date. Some chanters only create accounts on gay networking site while others restrict themselves to other sites like Facebook. A few make use of a combination of both the general and gay networking sites.

Discussing the accounts he has and how he uses them, Mr. Jallow explains:

I have accounts on Moco Space, Facebook and Tagged. But my favorite sites are Moco and Facebook. I open my account and upload my nicest photos and write nice things on my profile. I include information such as my age, occupation, education and hobbies. I then send requests to add friends.

He told me that he prefers Moco Space because it has a game component and that mostly mature professionals use it and it is easier to relate to them. In tandem with having multiple accounts, chanters make
use of multiple ghost profiles. This enables them to expand their chances of accumulating as many friends as possible and also to separate their normal life from their chanting life. For example, chanters open three to four Facebook accounts with different names and profiles which are used for different purposes and audiences. Their authentic profiles are used to connect with Gambian friends and family (mostly abroad), while the false profiles are used to search for toubab contacts.

Chanters’ aims, objectives and world view determine which social networking site they join. For example, those seeking to make quick money join gay networking sites as the general perception among chanters is that it is not only easier to establish relationships on these sites, but also easier to make money. Despite this general perception, a few chanters never open (or never openly admit so) accounts on these sites out of the conviction that dealing with gay people violates their religious beliefs. For instance, Mr. Jallow told me that he did not open accounts on either Bull Chat or Gay Romeo as he does not like to deal with men and considers “gay money” as haram: “I never add men as a principle because most are gay. Those who make quick money are those that deal with batimen”.

Mr. Jallow and others who share his views told me that only chanters who want to make money from the “batimen” have accounts on gay networking sites. They argue that they are Muslims and their religion prohibits them from eating the money of a “homosexual”. Therefore, Jallow narrated to me that he became incensed when a male friend on Facebook made comments like “gorgeous” and “sexy” on his photo. He interpreted this as an insult to his manhood and personality. He blocked the friend.

The issue of making money through gay networking sites can be contentious and is a source of stigma amongst chanters. As such, those who use these sites never openly acknowledge this as guys can be taunted for dealing with gay men. I once witnessed a quarrel between two chanters and heard one saying to the other “you cannot impress me with your gay money”. That is why Buba never refers to his online male contacts as his partners but only as friends. He would also conceal the fact that he has accounts on Gay Romeo and Bull Chat.

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6 Arabic term meaning sinful.
7 A batiman is a homosexual in Jamaican patwa. It is a provocative word.
Regardless of which social networking site is used, chanters then proceed to send friendship requests. This is not done at random as some certain factors influence a chanter’s choice of request to get successful outcomes. Firstly, chanters start by viewing the profiles of people on the networking site and send requests to those who are single or to those they share the same “likes” with. Generally, chanters carefully target “older and fat white women” as they consider these people to be the most plausible prospects to establish relationships with. As such, Jallow told me that his preference is “old ugly women” who he can “sweet talk by giving them confidence”. Guys who look for online relationships with men have no particular preferences. They mostly seek single men, both young and old, who state on their profiles that they are looking for relationships. It should, however, be noted that in some very rare cases toubabs also send friendship requests to chanters. This is particularly common with gay men looking for online relationships.

Once a potential contact accepts a friendship request, the chanters then start communicating with that person through the social networking site’s chat room. These communications take the form of banal information sharing such as location, occupation, weather, and life in general. After a few chats, the chanter then urges the friend to share his or her skype details. Insistence by chanters to communicate through Skype serves a few purposes. Firstly, talking to someone they can see through the webcam not only ensures the authenticity of the person they are in touch with, but also enhances flirtation and intimacy in the communication. Chanters cut all communication with those who refuse to share skype details after a few unsuccessful attempts to convince them to do so.

Secondly, ‘face-to-face’ conversations have benefits for chanters who lack a high level of written English. They normally rely on verbal communications and do not have to ask others for help with reading and writing messages. Moreover, face-to-face conversations eventually take the relationship to another level. This means that the toubab now belongs to the chanter. During this stage of the relationship, the communication becomes more intense and takes place on a daily basis. This also indicates that the toubab now belongs to you and is out of bounds to other chanters. However, chanters are sometimes involved in stealing each other’s online contacts. These occurrences have led to physical fights among chanters and in some cases end up at the police station. Contact stealing can be done in various ways and chanters known to have good
contacts are targeted. A café manager narrated an incident to me involving a regular chanter who came in to chat with his *toubabs* but soon realised that all his contacts had been deleted from his account. He then suddenly stood up almost in tears and shouted “who stole my *toubabs*?”

Chanters are normally careful at the early stages of the relationship with contacts not to rush things and scare away the *toubab*, as to make money, it is crucial that the relationship is taken to the next level. The final level is where chanters resort to various tricks to make money from the *toubab*. A cardinal rule of chanting is to avoid begging or soliciting help from the *toubab* contact in the early stages of the relationship. Instead, chanters invest their money by buying and sending African art and crafts as presents to the *toubab* in the initial stages of the relationship. The *toubab* reciprocates this gesture by sending shoes and other items to the chanter. Facilitating this exchange is the local post office where chanters can be found queuing outside on Thursday afternoons when the mail arrives to receive the parcels posted to them.

Communicating with *toubab* partners online who cannot speak English can be intimidating for many chanters. Unlike the Gambian beach hustlers who speak a couple of European languages, chanters only speak English, and for some their English is not that good. Chanters use tools such as Google Translate to communicate with non-English speakers. For example, when a chanter wants to send a message in Dutch, he first writes it in English and then translates it into Dutch using Google translate. He then copies and pastes the translated version into the chat box. The reverse is done when he receives a message. Chanters find this service very useful as it helps to break down the language communication barrier between them and their online partners.

**“Lovers and Deceptors”: The Accumulation of Wealth**

Chanters resort to various strategies to make money from the *toubabs* they meet online. These strategies can be broadly categorised into the “love method” and the “deception method”. These two methods are not mutually exclusive and chanters use a combination of both.

**The Love Method**

By far the most common, this entails establishing multiple relationships with several *toubab* men and/or women and pretending to be in a serious
relationship with them. Once a relationship is established and the chanter senses some emotional attachment, he then gradually starts demanding money and soliciting other forms of help from the *toubab*. Chanter are also sent monthly allowances from their *toubab* contacts/lovers.

Mighty Dre is renowned in GAMTEL for using the love method. He has a string of women that he is in relationships with. He told me that he does not demand large sums of money so he does not scare the *toubab* away. He often asks for as little as £20 from each one of them for his monthly upkeep. Using this strategy, Mighty Dre sometimes makes as much as £120 a month if six women send him £20. This is a lot of money when changed into Gambian currency and far exceeds the monthly salary of a lawmaker. Mighty Dre also demands extra money to pay for social events like *Tobaski*.

One afternoon, a few days before *Tobaski*, Mighty Dre invited me over to his PC. He was simultaneously chatting with no fewer than six women on both TAGGED and Facebook as shown by his screen. Appearing in one of the Facebook chat windows was the photo and conversation of a middle aged lady (in her mid-forties). The name “Chastity G in Allentown P” appeared at the top of the chat window and below the conversation read as follows: “I am here sweetie. How are you doing?” Dre replied “Am cool love, just missing ya”. The ladies in the other chat windows were “Shirlene”, also roughly the same age as Asheville. “Cathy O”, slightly older, say about 50 in Cheyenne, WY and “Tammy S” in Topke, KS. “Tammy S” was the only one of a medium weight as all the others were slightly obese. All the conversations revolved around love and missing each other and how they wished to be near each other. The message that, however, drew my attention was the one from “Jane”, one of Dre’s lovers, which read:

“32 Euros sent through W Union. The answer is Facebook. Please no more money talk if we shall remain friends on Facebook. The purpose is not economic as I see it. I hope your Tobaski will be good”.

Dre interacted with all these women, shifting from one chat window to another and replying to their messages without getting distracted or raising any suspicion from the women. Dre told me that this is what he does for a living and that in a good month and depending on how many women he is in contact with, he can make around D25,000 (around £350) a month.

Female chanters also use the ‘love method’ to make money from their online male partners who occasionally send them money to pay for
education and basic subsistence. Binta, for example, applies this method to John, her ‘sugar daddy’ she met on Tagged. Binta told me that John is a wealthy movie star in Hollywood. Whether this is true or not, the idea that Binta is dating a movie star in the US was a cause for hope for a brighter future for her and her family. John has promised to marry Binta and to take her to the US. In the meantime, the man is sponsoring her, as she told me:

I am very happy and lucky as well. He is the first man I added when I opened an account on Tagged and now we will get married. Since I met him, I have not added anyone else and I do not accept requests from other people. I do not want to spoil my chances. He has been kind to me. He is rich and he sends me money all the time. He loves me a lot.

Unlike the male chanters, Binta does not have multiple relationships. She told me that she has not sent any more requests to other men since she met her John and does not accept requests from other men. The reason for this is that she does not want to spoil her chances. It seems that Binta is content and grateful with what John is doing for her and her family. Among the female chanters I had conversations with, Binta is the only one exhibiting this level of loyalty as the others engage with multiple online partners.

A second variation of the love method involves looking for gay partners on either Bull Chat or Gay Romeo and pretending to be in a relationship with them. Buba told me that this method is the most lucrative. Despite this, Buba revealed that most chanters never meet their online gay partners even though some express the desire to come and visit them. When this happens, the chanters scare the *toubab* by telling him that Gambian society is hostile to gays and that they could go to jail. The *toubab* is then referred to the Gambian president’s threats that any gay man who sets foot in the Gambia will be beheaded.

Most of the communication takes place through Skype where nude photos are exchanged which eventually escalates into online sex. Before explaining to me how it works, Buba nervously looked around to check no-one else was listening:

Gays have money and once you tell them you are gay, they send you money. You tell them you are gay but that you face a lot of stigma. Your family has abandoned you and you have no one to help you. They will feel sorry for you and start helping you (sic).
As evident in the above quote, chanters not only lie about their sexual orientation to their online partners, they also give them the impression that their choice to associate with them is making them experience harsh conditions from both their family and society in general. In other words, the chanter indirectly tells the *toubab* that he is being abandoned by his family because of the sacrifice he has made to be with him. This in itself is a strategy to make money as the gay partner will feel partly guilty for the chanter’s situation and so will send money to him.

One of the ways in which chanters make money from online gay partners is by engaging in online sex with them. I have on many occasions observed chanters having online sex with male partners in full cybercafés without drawing the attention of anyone else. The first time I encountered these scenes was at the AON, where upon entering, I saw the screen of PC 1 showing blurred images of an old naked man lying on a couch masturbating. The boy using the PC was not more than 19 years old. He was also pretending to be masturbating by holding his penis, although he had his clothes on.

For chanters, sending a photo of their private parts or just pretending to be masturbating in front of a screen for a few minutes is an easy way to secure them a huge amount of money. Buba confided that he sometimes engages in such activities. He tried to defend his actions by adding that his relationships with gay men are only virtual and never become physical. In fact, he described the *toubabs* who enjoy these online romances as ‘foolish’. Buba told me he finds it hard to understand the pleasure their online partners get from these encounters. Nonetheless, chanters like Buba capitalise on their partner’s desire to have an online romance with them to make extra income. They tell the partner that having an online romance at the cybercafé is not safe any longer and that for the romance to continue they need their own private laptop. Once the partner is willing to provide this, the chanter inflates the price of a new laptop but buys a second hand one upon receiving the money. Some will not even buy the laptop and will use the money for other purposes. Buba bought a laptop with the money his contact sent him but later sold it as it became too expensive for him to maintain. Internet data in the Gambia is quite expensive.
The Deception Method

In addition to the love method, chanters also resort to using ‘deceptive’ methods to make money from their toubab contacts. This method involves fabricating plight stories to get financial assistance from toubab contacts. To achieve the desired outcome, chanters fabricate stories which are backed up by supportive documents like receipts. These include telling lies about being sent away from school, to being involved in an accident. Explaining how it works, Mr. Jallow told me:

The whole thing about the Internet is begging and deceit. We explain our conditions to the toubabs. We make life seem hard for them. We exaggerate our poor living conditions. We tell them we lost our parents and we have no one to take care of us. Through this they feel sorry for us and send us money. When they want to help us, we inflate the prices. We send false invoices and false school admission letters. But we have to be a smart liar to succeed in this. To be a smart liar is to have a good memory and to avoid lying all the time.

Mr. Jallow has been less successful in using the love method. However, his success in using the deception method has gained him recognition and respect amongst his peers. Like Mr. Jallow, the chanters that employ the deception method are those who are reluctant to engage in online sexual activities as a source of income. Instead, they find various ways to make money from toubab contacts whose relationships with them are primarily based on friendship. For instance, a few of Mr. Jallow’s contacts are families who regard him as a son. They occasionally send him money and pay for his education. Despite him being a teacher and not a student, he told the family that he is a student. The family sends Mr. Jallow D10, 000 (£150) every term to pay for his fees. As evidence that he has indeed paid the fees, Mr. Jallow prepares a forged receipt that he scans and sends to the family. With his access to school documents, he also forges the term reports that he sends. He also sometimes poses and takes photos in a school uniform that he sends together with the term reports.

A variation of the deception method that is used by all chanters, regardless of the type of relationship they have with their contacts is called the “emergency trick”. All my interlocutors have told me that they have at one point used this trick, particularly when they urgently need money. The trick involves terminating all communication with toubab
contacts for a couple of days. This, according to my interlocutors, will make the contact become worried about their welfare and they will be inclined to ask about their whereabouts once they resume communication again. Chanters use this opportunity to fabricate stories which will prompt the contact to offer financial assistance. Some of the stories I heard from my interlocutors include fabrications such as ‘a parent is sick and has been admitted to hospital with no money to buy life-saving medication or that a big storm has brought down their home leaving him and his siblings and parents homeless’. These stories are supported by forged medical bills, pictures of small children standing in front of a broken down house or a picture of an old woman lying in a hospital bed, which are scanned and sent to the contact. Chanters gain by inflating the cost of the medical bill or the cost of anything that the contact is ready to help them with.

Although not all contacts send money to help, having many contacts and telling them the same story opens up opportunities for at least one or two to provide assistance. The story of Bigger that I briefly narrated in the introduction of this chapter provides a perfect scenario of how the emergency trick works.

It was two days before *Tobaski* and GAMTEL was busy as usual as chanters need money to buy rams for their parents and new clothes to celebrate the event. Whilst sitting chatting with Kalilu, the café manager on duty that morning, Bigger came in and asked to speak to him in private. They went outside and after a few minutes, Karl, as he is fondly called, came back and explained what Bigger wanted to do. Basically, Bigger had requested to use the small empty room situated in the corner of the café. Bigger said he needed money badly as *Tobaski* is fast approaching and things are hard. He said his *toubab* friend had sent him money a few weeks ago but he used that money for some other purpose and would not just want to demand more money.

Bigger planned to tell his friend that he was involved in a motor accident and urgently needs lifesaving surgery. He wanted Karl to allow him to use the small room as a makeshift hospital room. Ten minutes later, Bigger showed up with another man, a laptop and a small mattress which was to be the hospital bed. The man he came with was to act as the ‘doctor’. Bigger also came with a bandage and a small bottle containing red liquid that looked like blood. Once in the room, he tied the bandage to his head and a small amount of the liquid was poured on the bandage to make it appear that he was wounded on the head.
Once the laptop was connected and the web cam fixed onto it, Bigger lay down on the mattress. The Skype call was made and his friend (Hendriks) picked up. After exchanging a few pleasantries, the friend asked what had happened and Bigger pretending to be too weak to speak narrated that he was involved in a motor accident and that he could not talk but the ‘doctor’ would explain. The ‘doctor’ then took over and explained the situation to Hendriks and told him that his friend needed urgent surgery if he is to survive from the injuries sustained from the accident but that the clinic’s policy dictates that the money needs to be paid up front which is about 15,000 Dalasis (around 300 euros). Hendriks pleaded with the ‘doctor’ to go ahead and do the surgery and said that he would send the money after work as he was at work but the doctor refused. He left work straight away and went to the nearest Western Union outlet to send the money. He promised he would call back in half an hour.

After exactly 25 minutes, Hendriks came back online and gave Bigger the Money Transfer Control Number (MTCN) and the amount which was about three hundred euros. Bigger thanked him and told him he would keep him updated. As the Western Union office is just adjacent to GAMTEL, Bigger went straight there and collected the money. He came back and saw Karl outside and then left with his mattress and the doctor. He had already removed the bandage from his head. But for the next few visits to GAMTEL, whilst talking to Hendriks he would have the bandage tied to his head. I am not sure how much he gave Karl but I am sure he got something for his Tobaski.

This is just one of Biggar’s many tricks that made him popular in GAMTEL. Although this method might be morally questionable to an outsider, the general perception among chanters is that it is okay as long as it is done to get money from the toubabs. As Karl confirmed to me “when you know how to lie to get the money from the toubabs, people respect you and you become popular as someone with a smart brain”.

This incident reveals that, with a ‘smart brain’, little effort and some collaboration from café managers, chanters can make easy money. This is, of course, facilitated by ICT. Within just a few minutes, Bigger made three hundred euros. This is more than the monthly salary of a government minister in the Gambia. It also shows that chanters have the ability to evoke trust, sympathy and assurance from their contacts. The time I spent with chanters made me understand that to be a good chanter, one needs to possess certain qualities. Chanters are very
assertive and they never give up. They have the ability to make their case in a convincing way and the manner in which they handle the many contacts they have and the patience with which they give them the attention they need is just incredible.

Summary

In this study, I have documented the hustling strategies of a group of youths who call themselves chanters. Drawing on their accounts, I have shown how young marginalised Gambians make use of accumulative opportunities provided by the Internet to achieve socio-economic advancement. The chapter specifically described the strategies employed by chanters to make money from their unsuspecting online partners, mostly *toubabs*. By resorting to a variety of strategies, chanters are able to accumulate the wealth they need to fulfil their family obligations and also to ensure future financial security. Although some of the strategies can be morally questionable, chanters justify their hustling activities as worthwhile.

In relying on the generosity of and assistance from *toubabs*, chanters portray an image of poverty and social exclusion and how these are used as a way of appealing for help from their *toubab* contacts. Chanters’ strategy of acquainting themselves with the interests of their potential candidates before sending them a friendship request provides a platform for easy conversations and makes it easier for chanters to know what the *toubab* likes so that conversations can be directed towards their interests.

References


