

Youth Financial Access and the Conditions of Economic Agency: A Cross-National Qualitative Analysis of Youth Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

Youth financial access is increasingly recognized as a contributor to economic participation and long-term development, yet youth perspectives remain largely absent from global financial inclusion research, which often relies on technical indicators such as account ownership or product usage. This study examines how youth aged 16 to 21 across twenty-four countries define financial freedom and describe the social, cultural, and institutional conditions shaping their economic agency. Using qualitative open-response survey data from 60 participants, responses were manually coded into eight thematic categories capturing interconnected dimensions of youth financial access, including definitions of financial freedom, barriers to financial independence, cultural and family expectations, financial literacy and education, perceived opportunities, policy and systemic support, and proposed reforms. Across regions, youth consistently framed financial access as a foundation for autonomy and decision-making rather than as a purely technical condition. Regional contrasts emerged in the sources of constraint, with respondents from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa emphasizing structural barriers such as labor-market instability, limited institutional support, and family financial obligations, while respondents from North America and Western Europe more frequently cited gaps in financial literacy and uncertainty about opportunity pathways. Across all regions, financial agency was described as socially embedded, with autonomy often negotiated through family expectations rather than exercised independently. These findings suggest that prevailing financial inclusion metrics may overlook dimensions of access central to youth lived experience and underscore the value of incorporating youth-defined perspectives into research and policy frameworks concerned with economic participation.

Keywords: Youth financial access; Financial inclusion; Economic agency; Youth perspectives; Global development; Financial freedom

INTRODUCTION

Financial access has become a central concern in global development policy, frequently linked to poverty

reduction, economic resilience, and long-term economic growth. International institutions such as the World Bank define financial inclusion as access to affordable and responsible financial services, typically measured through indicators such as bank account ownership, savings behavior, and participation in payment systems (1). These indicators form the basis of major global measurement frameworks, including the Global Findex database, and have shaped national strategies and international development initiatives aimed at expanding financial participation (2).

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Despite this emphasis, youth remain among the most financially excluded populations worldwide. Age-based legal restrictions, limited access to stable income, insufficient financial education, and weak institutional outreach constrain young people's engagement with formal financial systems, limiting both short-term participation and long-term economic capability (3, 4). Adolescence and early adulthood represent a transitional economic stage in which individuals begin to interact with financial institutions but often lack the authority, resources, or institutional permission to exercise full control over financial decisions.

Much of the existing literature on financial inclusion prioritizes adult populations and household-level outcomes, positioning youth primarily as future economic actors rather than present participants. When youth are included in research, their experiences are often aggregated into household measures or examined narrowly through financial literacy outcomes (5). This approach obscures how young people experience financial access independently and how access is mediated by family expectations, labor markets, and institutional structures that shape agency during youth.

This gap is consequential because economic exclusion during youth can have long-term effects on opportunity, mobility, and intergenerational inequality. Human development theory emphasizes that freedom is not defined solely by the availability of resources, but by individuals' ability to pursue valued life paths under enabling institutional conditions (6). When youth lack access to financial tools, knowledge, or opportunity pathways, their capacity to exercise agency is constrained, shaping educational decisions, employment trajectories, and perceptions of possibility.

This study addresses these gaps by centering youth-defined perspectives on financial access and freedom. Rather than asking whether youth possess specific financial products, the study examines how young people define financial freedom, what barriers they perceive to financial independence, and how social, cultural, and institutional contexts shape their economic experiences. By focusing on lived experience across diverse global contexts, the study seeks to clarify dimensions of access that are often overlooked in technical inclusion metrics. In this study, financial access is defined as the ability to engage meaningfully with money and financial systems in ways that support independent decision-making. This definition encompasses formal access to financial tools, informational access through financial education and guidance, and social access shaped by family

expectations, cultural norms, and institutional rules. This youth-centered definition provides the conceptual foundation for the analysis that follows.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Financial Inclusion and Measurement Frameworks

Global financial inclusion efforts have traditionally emphasized technical indicators such as account ownership, usage rates, and access to payment systems as proxies for participation. The World Bank's Global Findex database has played a central role in institutionalizing this approach by providing standardized, cross-national metrics of financial access (1, 2). These measures enable large-scale comparisons and policy benchmarking, but they also embed assumptions about how access translates into agency.

Human development theory challenges these assumptions by emphasizing that development depends not only on resources but on individuals' capacity to act, choose, and pursue valued outcomes. Sen's capability approach further argues that access to resources is meaningful only insofar as individuals can convert those resources into real opportunities and valued forms of action. This perspective is further developed in capability-based frameworks that emphasize the role of social, institutional, and relational conditions in shaping whether individuals can exercise meaningful choice (7). From this perspective, access without agency represents an incomplete form of inclusion, particularly for youth whose financial participation is shaped by social constraints, institutional rules, and limited autonomy (6).

Youth in Financial Inclusion Research

Existing research overwhelmingly prioritizes adult populations and household-level outcomes. Youth experiences are often subsumed within family measures, obscuring how young people navigate financial systems independently. Studies examining youth and digital finance, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, frequently focus on adoption rates and technological diffusion rather than lived experience or perceived agency (4). Recent public-health and development research further suggests that youth economic agency is shaped by intersecting structural, educational, and social constraints, which are often obscured when youth voices are not directly examined (8).

Research on financial literacy similarly emphasizes knowledge acquisition without fully assessing whether youth can apply that knowledge in practice. OECD

findings indicate substantial variation in financial knowledge even in countries with developed financial infrastructure, suggesting that access to information alone does not guarantee effective participation (5). Research on youth financial socialization further demonstrates that financial behavior and decision-making capacity are shaped significantly by family interactions, early work experiences, and educational exposure, rather than knowledge alone (9).

Structural Context and Youth Economic Agency

Youth labor market conditions further shape how financial access is experienced. Global employment data show that young people face disproportionate exposure to unemployment, informal work, and unstable transitions into adulthood, particularly in low- and middle-income regions (10). Social and cultural contexts also shape youth agency, with family expectations and collective responsibilities influencing the timing and nature of financial independence (8, 11). Together, this literature reveals a gap between how financial access is measured and how it is experienced by youth. Existing frameworks prioritize technical participation while offering limited insight into youth-defined meanings of freedom, autonomy, and opportunity. Given the limitations of these technical metrics, a qualitative approach is required to capture the nuances of youth agency, as detailed in the following section.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how youth across diverse global contexts define financial freedom and describe the conditions shaping their economic agency. A qualitative approach was selected because the research aims to capture youth interpretations, meanings, and lived experiences rather than to measure prevalence or test causal relationships. The methods described below are organized to guide the reader step by step through participant selection, data collection, and response analysis.

Study Design and Rationale

The study is exploratory in nature and centers on youth-defined perspectives on financial access. Rather than treating financial inclusion as a binary outcome measured by product ownership, the study examines how young people conceptualize access, autonomy, and constraint in their own words. This design choice reflects the study's core objective: to understand financial access

as experienced and interpreted by youth, rather than as externally defined by institutional metrics.

Qualitative open-response surveys were selected as the primary data collection method to allow participants to articulate their experiences without being constrained by predefined answer choices. This approach is particularly well-suited to cross-national research in which cultural, social, and institutional contexts vary widely and may not be adequately captured through standardized quantitative instruments.

Participants

The study included 60 youth aged 16-21, representing 24 countries. Participants were recruited through international youth networks, student-led organizations, and online forums that facilitate global youth engagement. Recruitment prioritized diversity of geographic and socioeconomic context rather than statistical representativeness. As a result, the sample reflects a wide range of perspectives rather than a nationally representative population.

Participants self-reported their age and country of residence. No additional demographic information was required, and no personally identifiable data were collected. Participation was voluntary and uncompensated. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the study and the anonymous use of their responses prior to beginning the survey.

For analytical purposes, participants were grouped into broader regions: North America, South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, Western Europe, and Southeast Asia. These regional groupings were used to facilitate comparison across contexts while maintaining sufficient sample sizes for thematic analysis. Importantly, these groupings are not intended to imply uniform experiences within regions or to substitute for country-specific analysis. These groupings are intended to illustrate broad contextual patterns rather than represent regional populations. Because the sample is small and exploratory, regional comparisons should be interpreted as illustrative rather than representative of youth experiences within those regions.

Survey Instrument

Data was collected via an online survey comprising primarily open-ended questions. The survey instrument was designed to guide participants from descriptive questions about access toward reflective questions about meaning, constraint, and agency. This sequencing was intentional, allowing respondents to situate their

experiences before articulating broader interpretations.

The survey consisted of eighteen questions addressing several key domains. Initial questions asked participants whether they had access to formal financial tools, such as a bank account or mobile money platform, and what type of access they possessed. These questions were included to establish baseline exposure to financial systems without assuming that access implied control or autonomy.

Subsequent questions explored financial knowledge and preparation, asking whether participants had received financial education in school, whether they knew how to create and use a personal budget, and what resources helped them understand money. These questions were designed to capture both formal instruction and informal learning through family, peers, or media.

To examine constraints on agency, participants were asked what, if anything, stopped them from handling their own finances or earning money, and whether they had ever earned income and through what means. These prompts invited respondents to describe barriers in their own terms, including legal, institutional, economic, or social constraints.

Later questions focused on interpretation and values. Participants were asked what financial freedom meant to them, whether they felt hopeful or discouraged about their financial future, and whether they believed they had access to the same opportunities as others their age. These questions were intentionally open-ended in order to elicit youth-defined meanings rather than externally imposed definitions.

Finally, the social and institutional context was examined through questions asking whether teens in participants' families or cultures were expected to manage their own money or wait until adulthood, whether national laws or systems supported youth financial participation, and what changes participants would make to improve financial access for young people. A full list of survey questions can be found in Appendix A.

Analytic Approach

Responses were analyzed using qualitative thematic coding. A thematic approach was selected to identify recurring patterns across narratives while preserving the contextual richness of individual responses. Responses were analyzed using qualitative thematic coding, following the six-phase framework established by Braun and Clarke to ensure rigorous pattern identification and thematic consistency (12). The coding framework was developed prior to full analysis and consisted of eight

thematic categories derived from the research questions and an initial review of responses.

The eight themes were defined operationally to ensure consistency across the dataset. These included definitions of financial freedom, barriers to financial independence, cultural and family expectations, financial literacy and education, access to financial tools, perceived opportunities, policy and systemic support, and proposed reforms. Because youth experiences often reflected overlapping dimensions of access, individual responses could be coded into multiple themes.

Response patterns varied across question types. The dataset included 60 respondents overall, but because participants were permitted to skip questions, the number of responses contributing to each thematic category differed slightly across survey prompts. Concrete questions related to financial tools, income experience, and financial knowledge were answered by most participants (approximately 52–53 responses), while more abstract or policy-oriented questions, such as those asking respondents to define financial freedom, evaluate national systems, or propose policy reforms, were more frequently skipped. For example, questions asking participants to propose institutional reforms received approximately 45 responses, while open-ended prompts inviting broader reflections received fewer responses (20 or fewer). Skipped responses were not treated as missing data errors but were interpreted as analytically meaningful, reflecting differences in exposure, perceived relevance, or ability to engage with abstract institutional concepts. During analysis, themes were derived only from substantive responses to each question, resulting in variation in the number of respondents contributing to specific thematic categories. Frequencies and proportions are therefore reported descriptively to contextualize qualitative patterns rather than to imply statistical representativeness.

Coding Procedure

The coding process occurred in three stages to ensure transparency and rigor. First, all responses were read in full to identify discrete segments expressing a single idea or experience. This stage ensured familiarity with the full dataset and allowed patterns to emerge organically before formal categorization.

Second, segments were assigned to one or more thematic categories based on conceptual alignment. When responses referenced multiple dimensions of access, such as family expectations and institutional constraints, segments were coded accordingly. This

approach reflects the interconnected nature of youth financial experiences rather than forcing narratives into singular categories.

Third, coded instances were aggregated both globally and by region to identify recurring patterns and contextual contrasts. Coding emphasized the presence of themes rather than the strength of sentiment to allow comparison across diverse narrative styles and cultural contexts. Frequencies and proportions were calculated to contextualize qualitative patterns without implying statistical generalizability.

Manual coding was selected over automated methods to preserve nuance, tone, and implied relationships within responses. Given the exploratory nature of the study and the modest sample size, manual coding allowed for greater interpretive precision. Because coding was conducted by a single researcher, additional steps were taken to strengthen analytic rigor and reduce interpretive bias. These included repeated review of the full dataset, consistent application of operational theme definitions, and ongoing documentation of coding decisions throughout the analysis process. Reflexive attention was also given to whether thematic interpretations reflected recurring participant narratives rather than the researcher's assumptions.

Ethical Considerations

The study involved anonymous, voluntary participation and did not collect sensitive personal information. Respondents were informed of the purpose of the research and their right to skip questions or discontinue participation at any time. Because the study involved anonymous, voluntary survey participation and did not collect sensitive personal information, it was assessed as minimal risk according to standard ethical guidelines for survey-based research. No institutional affiliation or formal Institutional Review Board process was involved in this study.

RESULTS

This section presents the dominant patterns that emerged from the qualitative analysis and explains how youth across regions described financial access, constraint, and economic agency. Because the study draws on a small, non-representative sample across many countries, the regional patterns presented below are intended to illustrate differences in narrative emphasis rather than to suggest structural generalization about regional populations. Findings are organized around the

themes most central to respondents' narratives, beginning with youth definitions of financial freedom and moving through perceived barriers, social context, access to financial tools, and proposed reforms. Where relevant, variation in participation across questions is briefly noted to clarify how responses should be interpreted.

To situate the qualitative findings, Figure 1 displays the frequency of coded thematic categories across all responses. Because individual responses could be coded into multiple themes, frequencies reflect analytic prominence rather than respondent counts. Definitions of financial freedom, barriers to financial independence, and cultural and family expectations emerged as the most frequently coded themes, indicating that youth consistently framed financial access as central to autonomy and agency rather than as a technical concern (Figure 1).

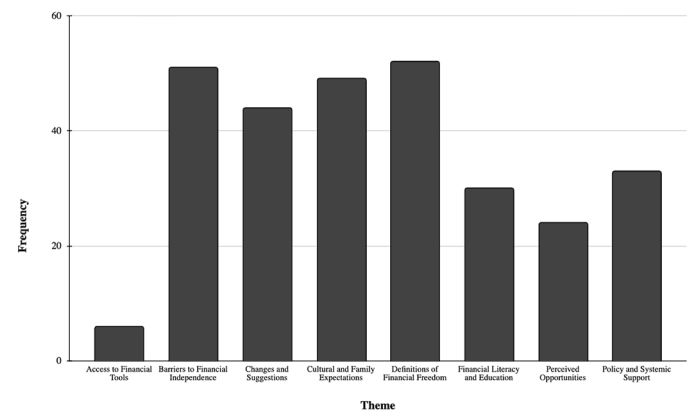


Figure 1. Frequency of coded thematic categories across all qualitative survey responses. Counts represent the number of coded instances identified through thematic analysis; individual responses may contribute to multiple themes.

Youth Definitions of Financial Freedom

Across all regions, youth definitions of financial freedom were strikingly consistent in emphasizing autonomy rather than accumulation. When asked what financial freedom meant to them, respondents overwhelmingly described the ability to make independent decisions, manage money without constant oversight, and plan for the future with a sense of stability and control. Financial freedom was rarely framed in terms of wealth, luxury, or high income. Instead, youth emphasized self-determination, predictability, and the ability to respond to financial needs without dependence

on others.

Many respondents described financial freedom as the ability to cover expenses independently, avoid becoming a burden on family members, and make choices aligned with personal goals. Others emphasized the emotional dimensions of freedom, including reduced stress, increased confidence, and a sense of security. Across narratives, financial freedom functioned as a condition that enabled broader life choices, such as pursuing education, supporting family members, or planning long-term goals. Although these themes appeared across all regions, their prevalence varied by geographic context (Figure 2).

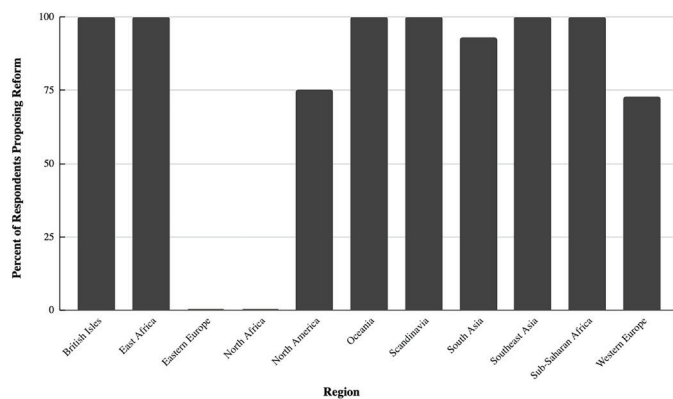


Figure 2. Percentage of respondents in each region who proposed financial access reforms. Percentages represent the proportion of respondents within each regional group whose responses included at least one reform-oriented suggestion.

While most respondents engaged with this question, a small number of younger participants skipped it, particularly those who indicated limited experience managing money. These omissions suggest that financial freedom may be more difficult to conceptualize for youths who have not yet been given opportunities to exercise financial agency, reinforcing the study's focus on access as a developmental and contextual process.

Barriers to Financial Independence

Barriers to financial independence emerged as a central theme across all regions, though their form varied significantly by context. Within this sample, respondents from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa more frequently emphasized structural constraints, including limited job availability, unstable labor markets,

low wages, and expectations to contribute financially to family households. These barriers were typically described as external and persistent, shaping youth trajectories regardless of individual effort or motivation.

Youth narratives from these regions often highlighted the tension between a desire for independence and economic realities that delay or constrain autonomy. Respondents described difficulty finding stable work, the need to prioritize family needs, and the absence of institutional support for youth employment or savings. In these contexts, financial independence was often framed as aspirational rather than immediately attainable.

In contrast, respondents from North America and Western Europe more frequently identified informational and navigational barriers. These included limited financial education, uncertainty about managing money, and confusion surrounding pathways from education to employment. Youth in these regions often reported limited access to financial tools, with inadequate guidance on how to use them effectively. While economic infrastructure was generally perceived as available, confidence and clarity were not. Not all respondents answered barrier-related questions. Those who skipped these prompts were more likely to be younger or to report limited engagement with financial systems. Rather than indicating the absence of barriers, these omissions suggest limited exposure or perceived relevance, aligning with broader findings on informational access.

Cultural and Family Expectations

Cultural and family expectations emerged as one of the most consistent and analytically significant themes across regions. Responses to questions about whether teens in respondents' families or cultures were expected to manage their own money or wait until adulthood revealed that financial agency was frequently negotiated within households rather than exercised independently.

In lower-income contexts, expectations often involved direct financial obligations, such as contributing income to household expenses or deferring personal independence to support family stability. These expectations were typically described as non-negotiable and rooted in economic necessity. Youth in these settings frequently framed autonomy as a collective rather than individual goal.

In higher-income regions, family expectations were more often described as supportive but still influential. Parents might provide financial assistance, restrict spending, or delay full independence in order to prioritize education or long-term security. While these

arrangements were sometimes viewed positively, they nonetheless shaped the timing and nature of financial autonomy.

Across contexts, respondents described financial decision-making as relational. Even when youth earned income or had access to financial tools, control over spending and saving was often mediated by parental rules or cultural norms. This pattern underscores the study's central claim that youth financial agency is socially embedded and negotiated rather than exercised in isolation.

Although these themes appeared across all regions, their prevalence varied by geographic context. Figure 2 illustrates the percentage of respondents within each regional grouping whose responses included specific thematic categories, highlighting regional differences in how youth experience and articulate financial access.

Access to Financial Tools and Experienced Agency

Access to financial tools such as bank accounts and mobile money platforms varied across regions, but this access did not directly correspond to perceived agency. Several respondents reported having formal accounts without meaningful control over funds, particularly when accounts were co-managed by parents or restricted by age-based regulations. Others described informal financial practices, such as cash-based arrangements or family-managed resources, that offered greater flexibility than formal tools.

Responses to tool-access questions were among the most consistently completed, reflecting their concrete nature. However, youth interpretations of these tools varied widely. Some viewed accounts as symbolic markers of inclusion without practical utility, while others described them as important steps toward independence, even if control remained limited. This divergence highlights the distinction between technical access and lived experience. Youth narratives indicate that formal access is neither necessary nor sufficient for experienced agency. Instead, agency emerges from the interaction of tools, knowledge, permission, and opportunity.

Youth-Proposed Reforms

Many respondents proposed reforms to improve youth financial access, demonstrating active engagement with solution-oriented thinking. Common suggestions included expanded financial education, earlier access to savings tools, clearer institutional guidance for youth, and stronger protection for young people participating in financial systems.

Not all participants answered reform-oriented questions, particularly those that required evaluation of national systems. Those who did engage often framed reforms in practical terms, emphasizing preparation, early exposure, and institutional accountability. The presence of reform proposals across regions highlights youth capacity to articulate concrete interventions and reinforces the value of including youth perspectives in policy design.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how youth aged 16 to 21 across diverse global contexts define financial freedom and describe the conditions shaping their financial agency. By prioritizing youth-defined perspectives, the analysis sought to clarify how financial access is experienced in practice and why formal inclusion does not always translate into perceived autonomy. The discussion below interprets the key patterns identified in the Results section, situates them within existing research, and explains their implications for financial inclusion frameworks.

Youth-Defined Financial Freedom as Agency Rather Than Accumulation

A central finding of this study is that youth consistently define financial freedom in terms of autonomy, control, and predictability rather than in terms of income level or wealth accumulation. Across regions, respondents described freedom as the ability to manage money independently, respond to expenses without reliance on others, and plan for the future with a sense of stability. These definitions emphasize decision-making capacity rather than financial status.

This framing aligns closely with human development theory, which conceptualizes freedom as the ability to pursue valued life paths under enabling institutional conditions rather than as the possession of resources alone (6, 13). The consistency of this definition across diverse economic contexts suggests that youth understand financial access primarily as a condition that enables agency. This finding helps explain why technical indicators such as account ownership may fail to capture whether young people experience meaningful participation. Access that does not translate into control or choice may exist formally while remaining experientially limited.

The fact that some younger respondents skipped this question further contextualizes these findings. Skipped

responses were more common among participants who reported limited engagement with financial decision-making. Rather than indicating the absence of interest, these omissions suggest that the concept of financial freedom may be difficult to articulate without the lived experience of agency, reinforcing the study's focus on access as a developmental process.

Structural Versus Informational Barriers Across Regions

The Results section demonstrated clear regional variation in the types of barriers youth identified. Respondents from South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa most frequently emphasized structural constraints, including limited employment opportunities, labor market instability, and weak institutional support. These barriers were typically described as external and persistent, shaping youth financial trajectories regardless of individual effort.

These findings are consistent with global labor research showing that youth in many low- and middle-income regions face disproportionate exposure to unemployment, informal work, and unstable transitions into adulthood (10). In such contexts, youth narratives suggest that access to financial tools alone is insufficient to foster agency when viable pathways to income and stability are absent. This helps explain why financial inclusion initiatives focused narrowly on product access may fail to yield meaningful empowerment outcomes for youth in structurally constrained environments.

In contrast, respondents from North America and Western Europe more frequently described informational and navigational barriers. These included limited financial education, uncertainty about managing money, and a lack of clarity surrounding educational and employment pathways. While formal financial infrastructure was generally perceived as available, respondents often expressed low confidence in their ability to use financial tools effectively.

This pattern aligns with OECD findings showing substantial variation in financial knowledge and confidence even in high-income countries with widespread financial access (5, 14). The results suggest that informational inequality can function as a form of exclusion, limiting agency despite formal inclusion. Together, these regional contrasts illustrate that youth financial exclusion operates through distinct mechanisms in different contexts, underscoring the need for inclusion frameworks that account for both structural opportunity and informational access.

Financial Agency as Socially Embedded and Negotiated

Across all regions, cultural and family expectations emerged as a key factor shaping youth financial agency. Respondents frequently described financial decision-making as embedded within family systems rather than exercised independently. In lower-income contexts, expectations often involved direct financial obligations to support household needs, delaying or constraining individual independence. These expectations were typically described as unavoidable and tied to economic necessity.

In higher-income regions, family expectations were more often described as supportive but still influential. Parental assistance, spending rules, or delayed independence were sometimes framed as protective strategies that prioritized education or long-term security. However, even in these contexts, autonomy was negotiated rather than absolute.

Furthermore, youth narratives reveal a gap between formal financial inclusion and experienced economic agency. Even when financial accounts are technically available, institutional gatekeeping and age-based regulations can limit young people's ability to exercise meaningful financial control.

These findings reinforce research emphasizing that youth empowerment operates within social and relational contexts rather than in isolation (8, 11). The results challenge financial inclusion models that assume individual independence as a universal or immediate outcome. For many youths, agency is exercised within family structures, and financial freedom is defined relationally rather than individually.

Formal Access Versus Experienced Control

Youth responses regarding access to financial tools further illustrate the distinction between formal inclusion and experienced agency. Some respondents reported having bank accounts or mobile money access without meaningful control due to age restrictions or parental oversight. Others described informal financial practices that provided greater flexibility than formal tools.

These accounts indicate that formal access is neither necessary nor sufficient for experienced agency. Instead, agency emerges from the interaction of tools, knowledge, permission, and opportunity. This distinction helps explain why financial inclusion metrics based solely on product access may overestimate effective participation among youth populations.

Youth Capacity for Policy-Relevant Insight

Many respondents proposed reforms to improve youth financial access, including expanded financial education, earlier access to savings tools, and clearer institutional guidance. These responses demonstrate that youth are not passive recipients of financial systems but active interpreters who can identify gaps and propose solutions.

Prior research suggests that early financial engagement and education can support long-term economic participation and resilience (9). Youth perspectives in this study reinforce the value of incorporating youth voices into research and policy design, particularly when designing interventions intended to expand agency rather than merely increase access.

Considerations for Interpretation

Several factors should be considered when interpreting these findings. Participants were recruited through online youth networks and voluntarily elected to participate, which may overrepresent youth with reliable internet access, higher educational engagement, or interest in financial topics. Youth who are most economically marginalized or digitally disconnected may therefore be underrepresented.

Additionally, participation varied by question type. More abstract or institutional questions were more frequently skipped by younger respondents or those reporting limited exposure to formal financial systems. These skipped responses were treated as analytically meaningful, reflecting differential proximity to financial decision-making rather than data omission. However, this variation means that some themes draw from smaller subsets of participants and should be interpreted accordingly.

Finally, the study relies on self-reported perceptions rather than observed behavior. While appropriate for examining lived experience and meaning making, this approach limits causal inference and prevalence estimation. In addition, the number of participants within each regional category is small, meaning that regional contrasts should be interpreted as illustrative patterns within this dataset rather than representative of broader regional populations. Regional groupings were used to identify broad patterns rather than uniform experiences and should not be interpreted as representative of national conditions.

Implications

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that youth

financial access is best understood as a multidimensional condition shaped by structural opportunity, informational access, and social context. Youth-defined perspectives reveal why access can exist without experienced agency and why technical inclusion metrics may fail to capture meaningful participation. Incorporating youth voices into financial inclusion research and policy design may help align institutional efforts with the realities of youth economic experience and support more equitable pathways to autonomy and stability.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how youth across twenty-four countries define financial access and describe the conditions shaping their economic agency. Using qualitative open-response data, the findings show that young people consistently understand financial access not as product ownership alone, but as a foundation for autonomy, control, and decision-making. Across regions, youth framed financial freedom in terms of independence and stability rather than income or wealth accumulation. Although the sources of constraint differed by context, with structural barriers emphasized in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa and informational barriers more common in North America and Western Europe, financial agency was widely described as socially embedded and shaped by family and institutional expectations. These findings contribute to financial inclusion research by clarifying the distinction between technical access and experienced agency from a youth-centered perspective.

This study is exploratory and based on a non-representative, self-selected sample, limiting generalizability and reflecting variation in response patterns across questions. Future research should combine youth-defined qualitative insights with larger and longitudinal designs to examine how access, agency, and opportunity evolve over time and across institutional settings.

Ultimately, the divergence between technical access and experienced agency suggests a need for a fundamental shift in how global institutions define and measure inclusion.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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APPENDIX A

Survey Questions

1. What is your age?
 2. What country do you currently live in?
 3. Do you have access to a bank account or a mobile money platform?
 4. If yes, what type of account or platform do you use?
 5. Have you ever received any financial education in school?
 6. Do you know how to create a personal budget?
 7. If yes, do you use a budget in your daily life?
 8. What resources help you understand money?
 9. Is there anything that stops you from handling your own finances or earning money?
 10. What is your biggest challenge to financial independence?
 11. Have you ever earned your own income?
 12. If yes, how did you earn it?
 13. Do you feel hopeful or discouraged about your financial future?
 14. What does financial freedom mean to you?
 15. Do you feel you have access to the same opportunities as others your age?
 16. In your family or culture, is it expected that teens manage their own money or wait until adulthood?
 17. Do you think your country's laws or systems support young people in managing their own finances?
 18. What changes, if any, would you make to improve financial access for young people in your country?
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