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`I now have so many friends!' how young migrants describe their quest to belong in a town in southern Uganda

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ABSTRACT
For many young people in Uganda, labour migration has become a part of growing up. They may not move far, but it is still a move away from a place they belong. For young migrants, the route to economic independence may be precarious, even for those who have people they know nearby. We trace the experience of 12 young male and female migrants (aged 17–24 years) over their first year as a migrant in southern Uganda. Finding friends who could help find jobs, lend them money and be around to relax with, fulfiled an expressed need to belong. That friendship was often based on a shared interest in sport or through their place of work. In a setting where all the young people had at some point experienced hunger, insecurity and a fear of failing to make it, those friendships were a marker of beginning to feel they belonged.

Introduction

After 9 months living in the trading town on the main road to Kampala, in southern Uganda, Joseph was satisfied that he was settled. He had work helping on construction sites during the day, and then in the early morning, for a few hours, unloading matooke (cooking bananas) from lorries arriving very early from the surrounding rural areas to supply the market traders. Sometimes he worked on people's fields, close to the town, to earn some extra money. While working on construction sites was his main job, he valued the work unloading for the market: not only could you be almost certain of being paid but also because you could get food (by stealing some of the fingers of bananas which fell off the bunches). All of these jobs he said he secured through his friends – friendships made since he came to the town. Joseph told us that when he first came:

> ` . . . I had very few friends, but I can say that in this period I have got a number of friends [. . .] the young people I have got as friends help me. When they get some work that they cannot do alone they call me, or they look out for me, and we do that work. I now have so many friends in here.'

In this paper, we examine how Joseph's and other young people's claims to making and having friends provide a marker of belonging for young people migrating to small towns in Kalungu District, southern Uganda. Our relational focus on friendship contributes to an understanding of the experiences of individuals, of their sense of belonging; it was not our intention to try to map friendship networks. Rather, we look at the ways in which individual young people begin to feel comfortable through the relationships they establish in a new

place. Belonging can be generated through relationships between people, and relationships between people and place (Cuervo & Wyn, 2014; Wyn et al., 2019).

As Shahrohk (2022) has observed, developing a sense of belonging is a process: `a personal dialectic in negotiation with one's surroundings' (p.21). Those surroundings, in terms of work opportunities, access to accommodation, and availability of services are not fixed, and circumstances can change in both small and dramatic ways for young migrants (Zuma et al., 2021). We draw on Vigh's (2009) framing of the concept of social navigation to encapsulate not only the image of a person being in motion, moving to town, and finding their course in a new place, but of the social environment moving and changing too. As Vigh (2009, p. 425) explains, social navigation `encompasses both the assessment of the danger and possibilities of one's present position as well as the process of plotting and attempting to actualize routes into an uncertain and changeable future'. One way of navigating a path through these changes, and nurturing resilience, is through connections to others, and finding a mooring through friends.

Adolescent resilience research has focused attention on the assets and resources which a young person can draw upon to manage precarity in their lives (Theron & Theron, 2010; Ungar, 2006). Many studies have highlighted the importance of schools and family in helping young people manage adversity (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005) but resilience is fluid and shaped by the context, changing with the risks faced but also the positive factors a young person may draw upon to counteract or moderate those risks (Theron et al., 2013; Ungar, 2014; Van Rensburg et al., 2018). For a young migrant, away from their family and no longer in education, other protective factors will be crucial in allowing them to make the most of the opportunities and reduce the harms that they may encounter in a new place. The migrant existence is, as Paret and Gleeson (2016, p. 281) explain:

> `often precarious in multiple and reinforcing ways, combining vulnerability to deportation and state violence, [. . .] insecure employment and exploitation at work, insecure livelihood and everyday discrimination or isolation'.

Precarity may be compounded for an adolescent by the new experience of being away from the support of kin and neighbours in their home place. One important factor in coping is connectedness – being able to count on others to help materially and emotionally (Punch, 2015; Tutu, 2013). Having friends is among the assets and resources which a young person can draw upon to manage risks or stressors in their lives. A friend may only be a temporary `spatial fix' (Hannam et al., 2006) while things are changing both in the world around and in a migrant's personal circumstances, but friendship, and importantly claims to friendship, can provide some security, a marker of status; of being someone in a place. Schut (2020) portrays this very powerfully in the opening paragraphs of his paper on young people's friendships in rural Indonesia. He describes his arrival at a village ceremony with five local young men. One of those men, Ferdi, carefully orchestrates their presence so that they are noticed, only taking his friends forward for introductions when he, Ferdi, was sure they would get the most attention. Schut (2020, p. 467) writes:

> `He wanted to be known, and this was his way to make people see that he was `somebody'; he had brought five friends along including a Westerner, and was claiming his space by greeting the hosts as one of the last guests to arrive'.

This carefully managed arrival is more than an act, Schut goes on to explain how making and having friends provides opportunities not only for fun for young under- and un-employed young people in rural Ngada in Indonesia, the setting for his study, but also serves to provide mutual support and encouragement as they `navigate personal aspirations, frustrations, anxieties and social pressure' (Schut, 2020, p. 479).

There exists a large body of work on the nature of friendship, offering definitions and boundaries for the use of the term (Apostolou et al., 2021; Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2022; Kitts & Leal, 2021). A friendship is generally assumed to exist if two or more people like and support each other, yet as Kitts and Leal (2021, p. 211) observe, the word friendship can have different meanings `because

relational norms and structural expectations may vary across gender, age or cultural differences'. The emphasis put on emotional and instrumental facets of friendship is an important part of that variability. Asselberg (2016) in her study of friendship among street traders in Moshi, Tanzania notes that it is support, the instrumental role of friendship, which is emphasized by the young people she spoke to, noting that this view of friendship `may run counter to Euro-American under-standing of what friendship `really' is about' (Asselberg, 2016, p. 308), but providing support to each other was an essential part of being a friend in the precarity of the lives of street traders in Moshi. Mao and Zhu (2023), agree with the stress being placed on the support afforded through friendship for young people, in their case highly mobile young people in China. However, rather than see the instrumental and emotional facets of friendship as distinct they show that:

> `In the context of precarious work and living conditions especially, friends' instrumental support and help often become a great source of emotional support, as they soothe one's anxiety, warm one's heart and provide a sense of security, that one has places to turn for help if things go wrong'. (Mao & Zhu, 2023, p. 9)

This benefit of friendship as a safety net both for physical and material support but also for emotional support, including having fun together (as illustrated in Schut's study), is central to our use of the term `friendship' in this paper. In Luganda, the main language spoken in Kalungu District, where our study is based, the word for friend is *mukwano*. The word can mean both a person who one has a bond with, which is not sexual, as well as being a companion or sexual partner. However, our focus goes beyond the nature of friendship, to the way young people use declarations about friendship – Joseph's `I now have so many friends' – as a signifier of belonging to a new place.

In what follows, we trace the experience of 20 young people in their first months as migrants to a small town, as they navigate finding work and accommodation. We show how establishing friendships has the capacity to help many of these young migrants generate a sense of belonging.

Methods

The main setting for this paper is a town in Kalungu District, about 100 km south of Kampala, the capital of Uganda. With a population of around 24,000[1] the town is situated on the highway linking Masaka and Kampala. The town is a resting point for long-distance truck drivers on journeys to and from Rwanda, Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo. We also draw on the comparable experience of migrants to a much smaller town with a population of about 5000 people, situated 20 km to the west of the larger town on the highway, in a more rural setting. The smaller town serves as a hub for the surrounding villages in the agricultural hinterland. For people migrating from rural areas to bigger cities, sometimes aiming for the capital city, Kampala, small towns are a first stop, and for some the only stop, where they can get work and a place to stay.

From September 2019 to March 2023, we developed and tested the acceptability and feasibility of a protective support structure – called `Lending a Hand' - for young migrants (aged 14–24 years old) in the two towns. The intervention was intended to provide support to reduce the harm of patterns of risk behaviour associated with young people's migration. The project had grown out of previous work documenting and describing the lives of migrant young people and this intervention had been designed with young people as part of that previous study (Bernays et al., 2021; Diop et al., 2023). Participants suggested that support to link them to health and counselling services would help during the early months of a migrant's stay in a new place. The new project, from which the data for this paper are drawn, was designed to test and modify the design rather than carry out a full trial of the intervention.

The initial phase of the work consisted of a rapid ethnographic assessment to document any changes in the places since our previous research (2 years previously) and a short questionnaire for young migrants to find out how long they had spent in the place and the type of work they were doing. We then recruited five `supporters', young people (three men and two women) who had migrated to the towns themselves, as peer supporters, who were to serve as points of contact for young migrants for the project. While the intervention

was being set up we began collecting data to document the migrant experience at the time of the new project. We conducted in-depth interviews initially with 20 young people (nine women and 11 men) aged 17–23 years who had migrated in the 9 months before the interview to the study location. We were then able to conduct repeated interviews with 12 of these young people (four women and eight men) about 6 months after the first interview, and most data included in this paper are drawn from those interviews. The focus of the interviews was the collection of the narratives of migrant experience of daily life, including mobility and income earning experiences and their views on what had helped or hindered their settling into the new place and finding work. The participants were purposely selected to ensure a mix of age, gender and employment types from the young people who had expressed an interest in learning about the project intervention, whether they had made use of the information and counselling service provided through the project or not. Our intention in including in the design a second interview was so that we could capture changes over time in their lives, although because of the mobility of the participants, particularly the young women, we found it difficult to trace and contact all those who had taken part in the first interview.

The recruitment into the study and all data collection were carried out by two social science researchers, who were relatively close in age to the young people in the study and experienced in interacting with young people and collecting data with them. The interviews were conducted at the participant's place of choice, guided by a topic guide covering a brief history of their move away from home, their experiences since their arrival of work, accommodation and food provision, friendships and any challenges. The interviews were audio-recorded with the participant's consent and lasted up to 1 hour depending on how much information the participant chose to share. The interviews were conducted mainly in Luganda, the main language in the study area. A few interviews were conducted in other languages such as Rufumbira, Runyankore, and Kinyarwanda. The interviewers were proficient in all these languages. Brief notes written during the interview, noting things that may not be captured on the recording, or when a participant asked the recorder not to be used, were written up in detail immediately after each interview. The second interview focused on changes that had occurred between the two interviews, as well as the experience of accessing the services offered through the intervention, for those who had engaged with the project.

The two interviewers visited the towns frequently over the course of the study, which enabled them to have informal conversations with many of these young people and others involved in the wider project, outside the interactions during the formal interviews, which allowed us to keep in touch.

We (the authors, which include the two interviewers) conducted an iterative thematic analysis. This process fed into ongoing recruitment, sampling of the participants (which was done on a rolling basis as young people came forward to find out more about the intervention) and reviewing the choice of topics to talk about during interviews. We summarized audio-recorded data into detailed interview scripts in English using a mixture of reported speech and verbatim quotes (Rutakumwa et al., 2019). Scripts were coded initially using an open-coding approach, then using a coding framework. Coded data were checked against themes identified during the team's regular analytical discussions. Emergent themes were checked and discussed by the team to ensure accuracy of representation. The focus of this paper – friendship – was a recurring theme in the data.

Ethical and research approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of the Uganda Virus Research Institute, the Uganda National for Science and Technology and the ethics committee of the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine. Participants were approached and invited to take part by the local research team and asked to provide written consent to participate in the study activities. Following Uganda National Council for Research and Technology guidance (UNCST, 2014), participants aged 16–17 years old, living independently and providing for themselves financially, were considered emancipated minors and were able to give their own consent without requiring approval from a parent or guardian. Pseudonyms are used in this paper.

Using the framing of social navigation, we now describe how friendships facilitated young people's entry and sustained sojourn in the town, the ways in which having friends provided a mooring in the new place allowing a sense of belonging to emerge and inform our understanding of the boundaries and variation in the notion of and criteria used to support their sense of belonging for different young people. Table 1 provides an overview of the participant characteristics.

Navigating settling in with the aid of friends

Joseph, who we introduced at the beginning of this paper, travelled to the town where we met him because a friend from home had promised him a job in a restaurant. He was 20 years old at that time. Unfortunately for Joseph, he knew nothing about food preparation and struggled to do the work, so after a few months he lost that job but, he said, `a few friends' he had made since coming to the town helped him find new work. Joseph was not unusual; the decision to relocate was invariably influenced by the recommendations of others. For the majority, this was 'friends' who had previously relocated themselves. For others, the link was made by extended family members. The promise of abundant employment opportunities was the driving motivation for almost all who made the move. On arrival, the circumstances in the town were not always as hopeful as described. This was generally experienced as a lack of job opportunities for those who were not as fortunate as Joseph to have a job arranged for them in advance. For those struggling to make a living, this situation led to a period of disenchantment and a recalibration of their expectations, as they navigated a situation which did not fit with their ideas of what they had planned. As Bauman (2001, p. 125) observes it is not only the person who moves, `but also the finishing lines of the tracks they run on and the running tracks themselves' which move; for many young people their plans of making money in a set period of time invariably shifted. Earlier in the same essay, Bauman draws on a theme related to social navigation to note that:

> `owners of fool-proof vessels and skilled navigators view the sea as the site of exciting adventure; those condemned to unsound and hazardous dinghies would rather hide behind wave-breakers and think of sailing with trepidation. Fears and joys that emanate from the instability of things are distributed highly unequally'. (Bauman, 2001, p. 122)

By migrating with the aid of friends and relatives, young people may not think that they have a luxury boat, but they were putting their trust in the knowledge and skills of someone else to guide them on their way. Where that person failed in their support, there was not always another vessel on hand to board, and they had to find other ways to survive while they looked for work. Joseph for example, was fortunate because a friend provided free accommodation while he found other work, before he began to make an income so he could pay rent for himself.

Lydia lost her father when she was 19 years old and moved to the town at the suggestion of friends from her home place, because she had no support from her family. Her friends told her they would get her a job as a house girl if she travelled to the town they worked in:

> `I came and I did not even have a phone, the one who connected me paid my taxi fares and I came on the bus being directed using the conductor's phone. That is how I arrived here because I did not even know where this was.'

Like Joseph, Lydia's job did not go as planned. Her employer mistreated her, denying her food and making her work long hours. When she had earned a little money, she found a room to rent outside her employer's home, which made things easier, but then her employer failed to pay her regularly, so she struggled to pay her rent. After 4 months, she left her job. She had nothing to go to, and all but one of the friends who had persuaded her to come to the town had left. She had no one to help her and she could not go `home' because she had no one there to help her either. She began washing clothes for people in the town to earn some money to buy food. For a short while she had

Table 1. Background characteristics of study participants.

Pseudonym (bold denotes name features in paper)	Gender	Age	Education level	Marital status	Language	Months spent in town since arrival at time of 1st interview	Work at time of first interview
Betty	Female	17	Secondary	Single	Luganda	1	Waitress in a restaurant
Lydia	Female	20	Secondary	Single	Luganda	9	Laundry and farm labour
Teddy	Female	20	Primary	Single	Luganda	2	Waitress in a restaurant
Sylvia	Female	20	Secondary	Single	Luganda	9	Laundry, house cleaning, waitress
Agnes	Female	17	Secondary	Single	Luganda	7	Waitress in a restaurant
Winnie	Female	22	None	Separated	Luganda	4	Restaurant attendant, sex work
Joyce	Female	22	Primary	Married	Luganda	2	Planning a fish drying business
Harriet	Female	22	Secondary	Single	Luganda	4	Unpaid trainee hairdresser
Nambusi	Female	18	Secondary	Single	Luganda	4	Shop attendant
Jacob	Male	19	Secondary	Single	Luganda	8	Farm labour, construction site labour, porter at market.
John	Male	18	Primary	Single	Luganda	6	Soft drink vendor, offloads goods at market, construction site labour
Dominic	Male	21	Secondary	Married	Some Luganda (learnt after arrival in town the first time), Rufumbira and English	3 (but second stay in town)	Rice factory labourer
Joel	Male	21	Primary	Single	Luganda/Rufumbira	8	Rice factory labourer
Bosco	Male	21	Secondary	Married	Luganda/Rukiga/Runyankore/English/Kiswahili	10	Shop attendant
Joseph	Male	20	Secondary	Single	Luganda and Runyankore	8	Farm labour, construction site labour
Gerald	Male	16	Primary	Single	Luganda	8	Returned to school before second interview
Collins	Male	20	Primary	Single	Luganda	5	Fishing
Joshua	Male	18	Secondary	Married	Luganda	4	Offloading goods at the market, farm labour
George	Male	22	Primary	Single	Rufumbira	3	Rice factory labourer
Dickens	Male	23	Secondary	Single	Luganda	4	Pool table attendant

a boyfriend who paid her rent, but she broke off that relationship because he treated her badly, reminding her continually that he had found her when she had nothing, implying that she remained in his debt abusing her when she complained.

The struggle Lydia faced on her arrival and during her first 6 months was not unusual among the narratives the young people shared during their first interview. For some, the friend or relative who had supported them to come to the town provided crucial support during the liminal period as they sought to establish themselves. A place to stay was often offered by the friend or contact who had encouraged their move, or by new friends made shortly after arrival in the new place. The offer of rent-free accommodation (most often sharing a single room), until settled, was described by many participants. This offer may have only been for a few weeks, but it often provided the space and time to find other accommodation.

Peers who provided help and support on arrival were quickly described as `friends' in the narratives. And those who considered themselves well established expressed the wish to help others moving to town, with one young man describing the practice which he had benefited from and planned to provide as being like `a good Samaritan'. Shahrohk (2022) describing the experience of international migrants moving from neighbouring countries to South Africa, Mao and Zhu (2023) for young people moving long distances within China and Asselberg (2016) describing the experience of young migrants within northern Tanzania, all focus on the key role that friends played in facilitating the move and, importantly, helping on arrival with food and providing a place to sleep. Grätz (2004, p. 100) describes the friendships he observed in his study among young migrants working in gold mines in northern Benin, as `involving relative durability, mutual appreciation, comprising shared moral standards, and expectations of reciprocity and trust, sustained by mutual affection, ideals of equity and support'. In the setting of illegal gold mining, digging in unstable and dangerous mines, with the hope of rapidly making a fortune, the value placed on the feelings of trust and care for each other was very high, even if the relationship was not long-lasting, thus the friendships he described were important for survival. While the circumstances may not have been as perilous for the young people in our study as it was for the gold miners or indeed for the international migrants who went with friends across the border into South Africa to find work (Shahrohk, 2022), we found the level of trust placed in old friends who had facilitated the move, and to some extent new friends who helped out when young people first arrived in town, was high; many things about the new place were treated with suspicion and some fear, so young migrants needed someone they could rely on, who could help them navigate in the strange place. They were also people to relax with, even if that was only going to watch a football match on a nearby playing field, which was free entertainment (unlike the charge that could be incurred by going to watch an international match on a screen in a bar or lodge or using up data by watching a match on a phone). It was not only the young men who talked about watching local football matches, for some of the young women that was a safe place to share with friends too, a public open space which they could go during their early weeks in the new place.

Friendships and learning to belong

In his second interview, Joseph confided that his situation when we had first spoken to him was `scary', the place he was staying,, provided by his friend, was unsatisfactory because he had no privacy there. He had no money at that time to move elsewhere, and fretted about what he would do if he fell sick because he had insufficient money to buy food let alone afford treatment. Six months later he was full of confidence, he had work, he had a room he rented on his own and he had food. Most importantly he had friends, many friends. These were not only people who helped him find work and with whom he cooperated in stealing food (loose bananas which fell off the bunches) when unloading the lorries, they were also people who he could ask to help him if he was sick or needed some money. He said that they trusted each other, they knew he would pay them back just as they paid him back if they borrowed from him. He told us `this kind of life has given me freedom because there are no people watching and asking me so many things [...] it is me who makes decisions in my life'.

Others were not so fortunate in establishing their independence. Joshua had moved to the town with the support of an uncle, and after 9 months in the place he still stayed in his uncle's home. While his uncle helped him with food when he was unable to feed himself, Joshua, aged 17/18 years, lamented the lack of progress he had made in establishing himself in the town. However, he said that while the situation has not been good:

> `I have become used to the place, and the situation is slowly getting better [. . .] I have started getting friends and they call me for work. When there is a vehicle that has goods to offload, they call me, when they get somewhere to dig for pay, they call me, and we get some money'.

He went on to explain that his friends could help him with money too, if he needed it. He also confided that he had another friend, a girl, who he had been seeing for 2 months. She was living with her parents in town, and still attending school so they had challenges finding places to be together given he stayed with his uncle. He explained that he had `got' his girlfriend because his new friends had girls and he said he wanted to be like them. Those friends helped him by providing a space for him to meet his girlfriend in the evening. There were limits to his friendships though, he commented that he did not share leisure time with his new friends; he did not like their choice of entertainment in bars and clubs.

Dickens, aged 23 years, had settled in the town in the rural area. He had moved there with the help of an old friend who had wanted him to help manage his pool table, he was not paid for that work, but he did get food. He had learnt to make chapatis when he was still at home, so by the time of the second interview he had set up a business supplying these in local schools and had stopped helping with the pool table. He said proudly that he had made new friends: `I have so many of them now, and actually some of them are helping me in my business [. . .] when I need something and I don't have money, they lend me money and I return it later.' He went on to say how much he liked the place `I find it totally okay to live'.

Asselberg ([2016](#)) describes the difference between `common and true friends', among the street vendors in Moshi:

> `Common friendship bonds refer to a wider group and to more haphazard relations finding expression in everyday conversations or jokes. Acts of support among common friends range in meaning from being purely instrumental to [. . .] uniting the vendors as they deal with the uncertainty of their livelihoods.'

True friends, in the view of the young people Asselberg worked with, share a deeper and more lasting bond. For Joseph, Joshua and Dickens, who claimed what may be categorized as common friendships, people to help with work and support, that was enough to signify that they were navigating their position in the setting and learning to belong. It was unclear if any of these friendships would form a lasting bond, indeed that would be hard to know given such things can be affected by the trajectories of their lives and fortunes.

Lydia's experience was different. Even at the time of the first interview she observed that the friends who had helped her move to the town were moving away and only one remained. She had some new friends, but she met them occasionally only to chat, they did not appear to be providing any practical help. She lamented her irregular income from her laundry work because customers did not always pay her, claiming they were dissatisfied with her work. When asked if she had people who had helped her find work, she said that some had suggested jobs, but that had not worked out and she had `given up' on finding support from others. Finally, she confided that she had started to sell sex, after she split from another boyfriend she had been with for 2 months. She had to find money because she could not manage to pay her rent without his support. She complained about being forced into sex work because she had no other options available to get enough income to survive. She hated the work and worried about infection and sickness. Another young woman, Betty, explained how the friend who had given her accommodation when she arrived wanted her to

contribute to expenses by selling sex; Betty refused. She managed to get a job in a restaurant where she got one meal a day and a small wage to give to her friend for rent. By the time of the second interview Betty had left, and we could not contact her.

Interestingly, Joshua complained about what he saw as the ease with which girls could make a living in the town, and how much harder it was for men like him to make money. Lydia's story shows that for women like her there was nothing easy about the options available to make an income. She could not go home since her father had died. She seemed to be a reluctant resident in the town, struggling to make ends meet and complained `I don't have many friends.' However, she said she would not leave the place unless she had the offer of a job and connections in a place to help her. For the moment, what she wanted was a reliable job so that she could get money and `look for and rent another house which is better than the one I have now [which flooded when it rained], buy clothes for myself and be smartly dressed, plait my hair and also be looking good like other girls.'

Other women, like Teddy who was about 20 years old, had a more positive view of their life, although she sold sex to supplement her income. She had moved to the town with the support of a friend, who she had stayed with when she first arrived. The help from that friend, and the new friends she made at the restaurant where she worked, helped her cope with the situation she found herself in – needing to sell sex to afford her rent and food: `they would tell me that the situation I was in is the same situation they went through'. She said it was having these friends which had helped her to settle.

Sylvia was 17 years old when she moved to the town. She had moved to look for work and found a friend from her village who helped her when she arrived, including inviting her to share a room. She had met her by chance and had started talking, describing her as her good Samaritan for realizing she needed some help and providing her with a place to stay. Initially, Sylvia worked in a restaurant but had left that job to help a woman who made and sold chips as snacks. That woman was a relative, who Sylvia had not known was in the town until she moved there. She had moved in to stay with her, which she was very pleased about and enjoyed watching television in the house at night, rather than going out. She was often very tired because in addition to making chips she also did people's laundry to earn some extra cash. She said that the friends she had when she was working at the restaurant were too busy to meet so she did not have the opportunity to socialize.

While the four women who took part in the second interview cannot be considered representative of all young women migrants in the town, in contrast to the young men, they did not talk of their `many friends', if anything they suggested that they had fewer friends after six to nine months in the place, than they had when they first came. Perhaps, this was because of the different trajectories of the women's lives as they navigated the new environments which for many led from restaurant and bar work to selling sexual services. These experiences may go some way to explain why several of the women who participated in the first interviews, had moved away after 6 months. Betty, who was pressured by her friend to take up sex work had left; and Teddy who had worked in a restaurant and complained about the sexual harassment she faced at work, had left before the second interview. Few of the women laid claim to settling down and making `so many friends' or having a sense that they belonged to the place. As described in other studies, for example in Uganda (King et al., 2021; Nakamanya et al., 2022) Kenya (Shah et al., 2023) and Zimbabwe (Busza et al., 2014), the need to move on, to be a `new face' in a venue to be able to earn a good fee for sex, results in mobility being a part of a sex worker's life.

Navigating the boundaries of friendship and belonging

Jacob had been disappointed, in his words, by a friend who had promised him work in the town before he moved, only to have nothing for him when he arrived. Perhaps that experience made him more candid than Joseph, for example, about the place of friends and friendship in his daily life.

While Jacob explained how easy it was to make friends, by chatting and being friendly towards someone who may share an interest (in his case this was often a shared love of watching football) such friends were not people to confide in:

> `it is not that I go on telling these friends of mine the problems I go through because they are not as good as you think. You cannot confide in them entirely because you will tell them the problem you are facing now and tomorrow you will hear it somewhere as a rumor [...] they are the kind of friends that you cannot wake up one day and tell that you have this and that problem and they are able to help you, I only find fun from them.'

He contrasted these common friends, to use Asselberg's terminology, with the true friend who he had met through work, and he now shared a room with: `I normally share with this friend of mine I stay with because he can be of help to me. I can tell him that today I don't have money for food and he says '*me I have, we can go and eat*' but the rest, they cannot do anything for you.' When pressed to explain why this friend was different from the others, he found it hard to articulate why he trusted him but said: `For him he has a good heart. He doesn't have much but he has tried to support whoever has come to him, he doesn't help me alone.'

Jacob had needed the support of his `true' friend when he discovered that a girlfriend he had broken up with had an HIV-test and was found to be living with HIV. He did not find that out directly; one of her friends had called him and told him, also telling him that his ex-girlfriend had run away after the test, and they did not know where she was. They had called him because they thought he might know where to find her. Jacob explained to us that when he broke up with his girlfriend they had remained friends so they thought she may have gone to him for help. Jacob had gone to the clinic `in a panic' and had a test, and found he was negative. He was so relieved he decided not only to stop sleeping with women but also to break off his friendship with the group of women he had got to know through his ex-girlfriend. He seemed to regret that because he explained that they used to tell him their problems and for two of them living with HIV he said he helped them when they had doubts about taking their antiretroviral drugs. He said `they trusted me so much'. The yearning in the way he talked about being trusted resonates with the experience Shahrohk (2022) describes for young people who had migrated to South Africa who wanted `friendships that they felt would give them value and enable them to bring value to others' (p.27). The identity narrative which Jacob had constructed about being someone the women trusted with their confidential information, `I am the only person in this place who knows their HIV status', was valued by him and allowed him to portray himself to the interviewer as someone who was kind and thoughtful and aspiring to be in caring relationships with `true' friends.

None of the other men talked about friendships with women for anything other than sexual relations; the ambiguity of the term `mukwano' as both friend and loved one serving to merge sexual intimacy and platonic relationships under one label until sometimes they started to talk about the type of friendship they had with a girlfriend. None of the women talked of friendships with men; all mentioned the challenge of men who approached them claiming that they wanted to be friends, wanting to buy them food or drinks. Sylvia explained how she used to try to manage these situations by getting the food and drink but then avoiding providing sex which the men wanted in return. She used the word `conning' to describe this tactic: `It's being with someone when you don't love them but you just love to get money from him, that's conning.' Asked how successful this approach was, she admitted that she seldom got away without providing sex.

Knowing and negotiating the boundaries of friendship were critical as the young migrants settled into the new place. John, who was 17/18 years old, explained how he had arrived just after the lifting of the COVID-19 lockdown at the end of 2020. Schools were shut so he decided he would be better off leaving home and trying to make some money. He met some men playing pool who offered him a place to sleep and suggested how he could find work. These young men became his friends, helping him eventually to get a job washing vehicles.

When we asked him why he thought they had so readily offered him both a place to stay and suggestions about work he said: ` I arrived, and I asked for a job right away and they thought that maybe this child likes working so much. I just told them that I had left home and I was looking for work and where to stay and they told me that I will be commuting from there to go to work.' His new friends did not ask for information about him, and he offered none. He just said `and my life here started from there'. A similar narrative is seen in the stories from the young street vendors in Moshi who Asselberg (2016, p. 317) met: `looking for opportunities and starting friendships are mentioned in the same breath'. Mao and Zhu (2023, p. 9) suggest that recognizing the value of these instrumental and practical friendships to young migrants, far from home and in need of advice and support, chal- lenges an:

> `over-prioritisation of emotional disclosure in defining friendship, demonstrating how mutual help and being there physically to care for each other is at the heart of their friendship practices, while true friends are not necessarily defined through the ability to be emotionally close.'

The young people may be disappointed when a friendship does not develop into a caring, trusting bond, but it is apparent in their narratives that the boundaries to friendship were known. Jacob knew who he could not trust to keep his information confidential; John accepted that his new friends were `helping friends' and their bond was limited to staying in the same room and sometimes watching a football match together. Yet having these connections provided a network in the new place of people who knew him, and he knew, who saw him as residing and working in the place; of belonging before he, and others like him, moved on.

While the women spoke readily about the challenges of making friends in a place where they could be exploited for both sexual favours and free labour in restaurants and bars, the men were less willing to suggest there was a dark side to friendship. However, some talked of problems with friends who wanted to drink too much and party, wasting their money, or who let you down when jobs fell through or were in precarious and dangerous work. Dominic, for example, who worked as a bird chaser at a rice factory on the outskirts of town, where the employees' shared dormitories in old freight containers, learnt that since he had no privacy or security for his personal possessions, he could trust no one. So he chose to have no phone, so that it could not be stolen, and any money he earnt he sent straight home. He worked `from early until late' and he said he had `no friends.' Indeed, we found that others working at the rice factory shared the same experience: long hours of work, cramped and insecure living conditions, but a regular daily wage. Dominic certainly had no sense of belonging; he was passing through, earning money so he could move on. Many of the young people at the rice factory, including Dominic, had travelled from the west of Uganda to work in the factory. They could not speak Luganda and were, very obviously to others, not from the central region. Antonsich (2010) talks of two dimensions of belonging: `place-belongingness' and the `politics of belonging'; the territorial dimension of belonging to a place is an important part of feeling at home. Working long hours in the factory, Dominic had little time to interact with people away from work, and the barriers of language and ethnicity posed additional obstacles which it would take time to surmount, time he did not have.

Friendships – where they were made – may be transitory and instrumental but beyond the provision of help and support, the act of making friends provides an important marker of achieve- ment. Thorsen (2006, p. 99) describes how migration experiences for the young people she did research with, in Burkina Faso, were a valued part of the tales told by young and old: `especially for boys, migration had almost become a rite of passage to adulthood'. Being able to talk about the friends they had made in the place, the way they had settled in and forged an identity was valuable currency whether they moved on or not.

Joseph made a distinction between friends his own age and `older friends' who he looked to for money, as well as other support: `They are not very old but at least they are older than me and other friends of mine'. The existence of these older, experienced, friends was a comfort not only for the

money they had but also for their knowledge. A friend's personal biography forged by the barriers and opportunities that a migrant may have faced, and the assurance that they had settled and now belonged, provided an example for those following in their footsteps (George & Selimos, 2019).

Conclusion

In a setting where all the young people had at some point experienced hunger, insecurity, and a fear of failing to make it, friendships were a marker of beginning to feel they belonged. Yet, claims to having friends differed across the young people we talked to, as did their sense of belonging. Yuval-Davis (2006) notes that there are different ways to belong: `belonging can be an act of self-identification or of identification by others' (p.199): who a person is, where they came from and how well they fit in and matter to whether they feel they belong, and others see them as belonging.

Our analysis illuminates the ways in which friendships, or even claims to friendships, can be utilized as a resource to support young people as they navigate their way in a new place. The demonstrable benefits from their experiences of, and claims to, friendship are also leveraged as evidence of having attained a sense of belonging. This outcome may be partial or fragile, reflecting the transience of their experiences and the associated vulnerability of being in such precarious circumstances where there is little distance between things being manageable and unravelling to becoming desperate.

We identify the specific criteria that young people use to appraise the achievement of a sense of belonging through friendship. The first is that having friends activates potential 'options' that a young person can benefit from. For example, accessing employment or accommodation opportunities should they need it if their current situation deteriorated, or plans failed or did not materialize. The literature on friendships points to their value for physical and mental health and life satisfaction (Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2022; McMillan, 2019; Montgomery et al., 2020); declarations by the young men in our study about liking the place and feeling at home with their friends provided a glimpse into their sense of wellbeing. The young men's friendship networks helped them access health care and advice. Practically, friends also provide immediate options acting as a safety net, with a friend ensuring that someone else did not go to bed hungry or without somewhere to sleep that night.

The second is that friends can be leveraged as a resource to support a growing sense of confidence in oneself in belonging to this place. This recalibration was made possible through the number of friends, or the opportunities friends enabled, and served as an indicator of their progression towards belonging. Their developing confidence may also denote an emerging sense of security within this place. Having the resources of friendship to draw on might enable them to stay longer in the new place. They operated as a flimsy anchor.

Finally, young people made clear associations between their 'connectedness' to this place, denoted by having many friends, and being externally recognized by others as 'being someone here'. For the young men, who shared a language even if they were from different ethnic backgrounds, having `so many friends' acquired over six to nine months in the town, was a marker that they were settled. The young women, often because of the type of work they had to do in order to make a living, made fewer claims to friendship and in some cases, withdrew from friendship networks or lost their friends as those women friends moved on to other places. It is hard to belong to a place if the stay is perceived to be transitory and the work a woman does is stigmatized and, in the context of sex work in Uganda, illegal.

When considering the notion of belonging, it was the value, particularly for some of the young men, which making claims to friendship had in supporting their social navigation through a moving environment through providing known spaces and familiar faces. Friends helped them feel they belonged.

Note

1. Population statistics are taken from the most recent census in 2014 and population projections provided by the Uganda Bureau of Statistics (SAPs_Central_Region.xlsx (live.com)).

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