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YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE "YAHOO BOYS" SYNDROME IN NIGERIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY REFORM

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Abstract
Nigeria's recent history has been plagued by the activities of young internet fraudsters popularly called "Yahoo boys" who often engage their victims, mostly foreigners in pretentious online businesses or trading but often ending up swindling them of their monies. Consequently, potential foreign investors are scared away from investing in Nigeria, thereby leading to a loss in the country's GDP and a reduction in wealth creations for the youth themselves, paradoxically. While studies have largely blamed the "Yahoo boys" syndrome on deteriorating family norms and values, leading to the "get rich quick" mentality among the youth, much work has not be done to critically look at the protracted youth unemployment in the country as a probable cause. This paper, therefore, examines youth unemployment in relation to the "Yahoo boys" syndrome in Nigeria with a view to fostering a connection and solution. The paper is theoretical in approach hence, it utilised content-analysis method to analyse data and deductions drawn. The paper adopted the strain theory as theoretical framework upon which the paper is anchored. The findings of the paper implicated the prevailing youth unemployment in Nigeria to be largely responsible for the Yahoo boys' syndrome in the country, with its attendant detrimental consequences for the nation's economy and national outlook before the international community. It is therefore, recommended among others, that government should make concerted efforts in containing the high rates of unemployment among the youth in Nigeria.

Keywords: Nigeria; Policy reform; Syndrome; Yahoo boys; Youth unemployment

Introduction

Nigeria's recent history has been plagued by the activities of young internet fraudsters popularly called "yahoo boys" who often engage their victims, mostly foreigners in pretentious online businesses or trading but often end up swindling them of their monies. Consequently, potential foreign investors are scared away from investing in Nigeria, thereby leading to a loss in the country's GDP and a reduction in wealth creations for the youth themselves, paradoxically. While studies have largely blamed the "yahoo boys" syndrome on loss of family norms and

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values, and the general societal moral decadence, leading to the "get rich quick" mentality among the youth, much work has not critically looked in the direction of protracted youth unemployment in the country as a probable cause. It is against this backdrop that this paper examined youth unemployment and the "yahoo boys" syndrome in Nigeria, with a view to fostering a causal relationship between the two undesirable variables and accordingly, recommends functional and actionable policy shifts capable of arresting the problem.

Therefore, the main objective of the study was to examine youth unemployment and the "Yahoo boys" syndrome in Nigeria, with a view to advocating for policy shifts toward addressing this menace. The specific objectives included:

1. To examine the concept of youth unemployment as a probable cause for the emergence of "Yahoo boys" syndrome in Nigeria;
2. To examine the activities of "Yahoo boys" and their impacts on Nigeria;
3. To suggest policy measures that can be put in place by the government toward checkmating the menace of "Yahoo boys" in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

The strain theory, championed majorly by Robert K. Merton (1938), and latter theorists like Albert K. Cohen (1955), Richard Cloward (1960), Lloyd Ohlin (1960), Neil Smelser (1963), Robert Agnew (1992), Steven Messner (1994), Richard Rosenfeld (1994) and Jie Zhang (2012) in which rules of behaviour (norms) break down or become inoperative during the period of rapid social change or social crisis such as war or famine, and thus, fostering criminal or deviant behaviour, is adopted in this paper.

In a 1938 paper, Merton used Durkheim's theories on anomie in relation to criminology. Merton (1938) adapted the idea of anomie to the social, cultural and economic circumstances of contemporary US society. He discovered that the two components of culture – culturally defined objectives and socially acceptable methods of achieving them interact to create potentially anomic circumstances. Thus, Merton (1938) observed that society frequently emphasises the goals of achieving wealth, success and power; and that hard work, education and thrift are socially acceptable ways to achieving these goals. In contrast, force or fraud is considered illegitimate ways to achieving these goals. However, where people are under pressure because the social system essentially restricts the number of acceptable institutionalised ways to achieving the goals, criminal or deviant behaviour are often the results. Although Merton accepted that members of the lower class would most certainly be affected, he contended that such a pressure may equally affect people from different social strata.

Merton (1938) specifically mentioned "innovation" as one of the methods by which people deal with the strain issue.Here, when an individual accepts the goals of society but rejects, or is incapable of attaining them through legitimate means, such an individual may try to acquire them through the back door. For instance, a lot of people want material possessions and luxuries yet are unable to afford them. As a result, the tension that arises from the inability to afford material possessions or basic necessities of life compels them to come up with "innovative" solutions to their problem. To this end, they might extort money, sell drugs, steal or indulge in internet fraud as the case with the Yahoo boys' activities owing to the frustrations

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arising from structural inequalities breeding unemployment.

Methodology

This paper utilised qualitative method hence, theoretical in approach. Due to the goal and scope of this study, the study sourced data through secondary sources (i.e. published articles, textbooks, reports and the internet). Data from the secondary sources were content-analysed within the context of youth unemployment and the "Yahoo boys" syndrome in Nigeria, and deductions drawn.

Youth Unemployment and Emergence of the "Yahoo Boys" Syndrome in Nigeria

The age range of who constitutes youth across the globe differs. In Nigeria, the existing age range of youth was initially pegged at between 18 and 35 years. However, with the recent amendment to the nation's Constitution of 1999 with regard to youth's age-range, a youth is deemed anybody within the ages of 15-29 years (National Youth Policy, 2019).

Persons between the ages of 15 and 64 who are actively seeking jobs but are not yet employed are considered unemployed, according to the National Bureau of Statistics (2016). Youth unemployment is still a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the very fabric of the country. It needs a scientific approach to tackle it as a social problem (Ayinla &Ogunmeru, 2018). This is due to the fact that young people are the ones that suffer the most during economic downturns. Since young people are thought to have the energy and aptitude to partake in societal vices, the situation of unemployment among young persons has led many of them to turn to vices like internet fraud, drug dealing, burgling, cultism, ritual killings, prostitution, kidnapping, human trafficking, and terrorism (Fadeyi, Ajagbe & Oke, 2015; Ita & Bassey, 2022).

Though its exact timeline is unknown, the rise of the phenomenon commonly referred to as "Yahoo Yahoo", which is now synonymous with online fraud, is generally linked to a notable expansion that occurred in Nigeria in the 1990s when the internet was introduced (Iheaka, Nwankwor& Kalu, 2022; Nwobodo, 2024). Olaiya, Lamidi, & Bello (2020) claim that the "Yahoo Yahoo" phenomenon in Nigeria has conceptual roots that date back to the "419" scam era, with its name retained from Section 419 of the Nigerian Criminal Law Codes (Nwobodo, 2024). Typical of the 1970s, these fraudulent activities were targeting large-scale financial organisations, frequently with assistance from Western collaborators. As a result, those who participated in these dishonest activities were frequently referred to by the "419" or "Obtaining by Trick" (OBT) tag (Salifu, 2023; Nwobodo, 2024).

Without a doubt, governments and policymakers in Nigeria are having a hard time effectively addressing youth unemployment. The previous development plans' inadequate provision for job creation, corruption, poor administration, and the constant expansion of educational opportunities without corresponding job openings are all to blame for this high unemployment rate. Consequently, the deplorable living conditions and restricted prospects for social progression associated with systemic injustices have produced an environment in which illicit activities, including financial crimes like online fraud and illicit drug trafficking, are viewed as justifiable endeavors to ensure one's livelihood (Felbab-Brown, 2010; Virk, Nelson & Dele-Adedeji, 2024). However, the increase in socio-economic crimes by the youths indicates a "gap" in society (Ita & Bassey, 2022).

In Q3 2017, there were 15.9 million unemployed and 18.0 million

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underemployed people in the labour force, up from 13.6 million and 17.7 million in Q2 2017 (NBS, 2017; NBS, 2018). Additionally, as of Q3 2018, 20.9 million persons were officially classified as unemployed, while 55.4% of young adults (15–34) were either underemployed or jobless (doing nothing) (NBS, 2017, NBS, 2018). Young women from economically disadvantaged low-income backgrounds are compelled to accept precarious, unskilled, and/or low-paid jobs, such as beer promotion for alcohol producers and marketers, where they are vulnerable to sexual harassment from primarily male patrons. This suggests that young women are particularly affected by the scourge of unemployment (Dumbili& Nelson, 2022; Virk, Nelson & Dele-Adedeji, 2024).

Nigeria's economic disparity is worrisome, with unemployment rates rising from 23.1% in Q3 2019 to 27.1% in Q2 2020; and underemployment rising from 21.1% to 28.6% within the referenced period (Tanyi, et al., 2022). Specifically, the Nigerian Living Standards Survey (NLSS) in 2019 showed that the youth unemployment rate was 36.5% in 2019 (NBS, 2019). As revealed by the harrowing statistics above, young people, particularly those without productive employment are often mostly affected, with 13.9 million unemployed by Q2 2020. Similarly, youth unemployment rates for Q4 2022 was 8.3%, Q1 2023 standing at 6.9%, Q2 2023 standing at 7.2%, Q3 2023 standing at 8.6, Q1 2024 standing at 8.4% while Q2 2024 stood at 4.3% respectively (Tanyi, et al., 2022; NBS, 2024; Nigerian Economic Submit Group, 2024). No wonder 133 million Nigerians were multidimensionally poor in 2022 (NBS, 2022).

Meanwhile, it is projected that over 66 million people would enter Nigeria's working-age population between 2010 and 2030 (Price, 2019). Because to the aforementioned, Nigeria has a poor Human Development Index score, with 30.9% of its people living below the poverty line, primarily in rural and northern regions of the country (UNDP, 2023; World Bank, 2023a). The data above explains why, in a frantic attempt to protect their livelihoods, many young Nigerians have strayed from legal side employment, or "hustles" as they are known locally, to illicit enterprises (Virk, Nelson & Dele-Adedeji, 2024). As a result of the foregoing, Nigeria's economic development and progress will even be more threatened (Abomaye-Nimenibo, 2015; Ita & Bassey, 2022).

Given the foregoing, therefore, it is often assumed that the majority of social crimes committed by young people in Nigerian society are caused by unemployment. Therefore, the level of societal crimes like internet fraud, armed robbery, prostitution, oil bunkering, drug trafficking and addiction, rape, kidnapping, political thuggery, assassination, and other vices will be at their lowest if young people are given the opportunity to pursue worthwhile endeavours (Ita & Bassey, 2022).

Activities of the "Yahoo Boys" and their Impacts on Nigeria

For the purpose of shrinking the physical barriers of state boundaries, globalisation became the norm in international relations, making the world a global village where countries across the world interconnect for economic and socio-cultural engagements for mutual development. To this end, the increased involvement of both developed and developing nations in the globalisation process has brought both nations and individuals up to speed with technology to the point where they are now proficient in its use. However, the outcomes of globalisation processes are characterised by erratic and

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consequential changes to the staus quo (Hebron & Stack, 2013; Onota, 2021).

Oloworekende (2019) contends that the local term for Nigerian domestic cybercrime, "Yahoo Yahoo", is used interchangeably with cybercrime in Nigeria (Ochuko & Ene, 2024). It shows the skillful but dubious use of technical expertise to prey on gullible people. The crime can be divided into two main categories: pure yahoo scams, which involve using a computer or internet to commit fraud, and yahoo plus, which also uses a computer or internet but uses rituals and spirituality to enchant potential victims of yahoo scams and force them to comply with the fraudster's demands (Tade & Aliyu, 2011). Most of the cybercrime offenders are young people and teenagers from a variety of backgrounds, primarily students, craftspeople, or jobless people (Ochuko & Ene, 2024).

Global social and corporate contacts have been made easier by the internet. The globe has truly become a global village as a result of it (Ezema-Kalu, 2024). However, even if the internet has unquestionably accelerated improvements in communication, transportation, business and economics, it has also given rise to criminal activities, allowing people to commit scams and frauds worth billions of dollars every year. The widespread global problem of cybercrime has strong roots in Nigeria, reinforcing the long-standing perception that Nigerians are inherently dishonest (Nwobodo, 2024).

With one out of five young people active, Nigeria is recognised as a global hotspot for cybercrime in the West African sub-region (Whitty & Ng, 2017). Nigeria's reputation has suffered greatly as a result of the criminals' activities, which have cost millions of dollars to millions of individuals worldwide. Despite this, the crime is still on the rise, with young people joining its ranks at an increasing rate (Ojiego, 2021; Ochuko & Ene, 2024). Cyber fraud, counterfeiting, extortion, phony scams, unsolicited bulk electronic messages, nudity trading, online gambling, unauthorised access to computer networks are the main examples. Others include electronic information theft, malware, malicious codes, e-mail bombing, logic bombs, website cloning, false claims, online purchases, and other forms of e-commerce fraud and online time theft are among the activities of the yahoo boys (Onota, 2021).

The persistent threat posed to Nigeria's economy by cybercrimes has grown to such an extent that if government does increase efforts to curb this social vice, it may eventually become uncontrollable and have catastrophic consequences for the nation. This is due to the fact that young Nigerians who commit cybercrimes frequently target foreigners as their victims, which may have an impact on Nigeria's commerce and diplomatic ties with other countries and ultimately result in a decline in foreign investment in Nigeria (Onota, 2021).

Evans-Ibe (2023) asserts that Yahoo Yahoo actions have the capacity to damage Nigeria's reputation by feeding unfavorable preconceptions about its citizens as being essentially dishonest and unscrupulous (Nwobodo, 2024). As a result, cybercrime hinders the nation's socioeconomic development by fostering a lack of faith and trust in beneficial activities, denying innocent Nigerians opportunities overseas, and causing job and revenue losses domestically (Nwobodo, 2024). For instance, a cyber-attack on the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) platform of the Nigeria Customs Service (NCS) in August 2025 caused significant disruptions to cargo clearance operations at ports across the country, with licensed

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Customs agents grappling with their losses to demurrage charges on their consignments, as a result of the disruptions (Vanguard, 2025).

There have been several high-profile cyber-fraud cases linked to Nigerians living outside the country - some uncovered by the US's Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) (BBC, 2025). And such cyber-fraud cases have detrimental consequences on Nigeria's foreign outlook. The arrest of Nigerian scammer, Ramon Olorunwa Abass, popularly known as "Hushpuppi", and other members of his gang by the Dubai Police on June 25, 2020, serves as an example of this. The group was charged with scamming 1.9 million people out of around Dh1.6 billion, or roughly N169 billion. Items valued at approximately N15.845 billion (Dh150 million) were also seized, and Hushpuppi, the primary suspect, was extradited to stand trial in the US, where the most of their illegal activities were concentrated (Onota, 2021).

Furthermore, as part of the efforts of the Nigerian government to ensure Nigeria's Code of Practice for online safety is adhered to, Google, Microsoft and TikTok deactivated over 13.5 million accounts in Nigeria in 2024 (Punch, 2025). Similarly,Instagram owner, Meta, removed thousands of accounts in Nigeria that were trying to target people in online sextortion schemes in 2024 (BBC, 2025). Such scammers typically pose as young women online to trick people into sending sexually explicit materials before blackmailing them.In addition, the Nigerian government through the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) deported in August 2025, several Chinese scammers in a crackdown on 'foreign-led cybercrime syndicates in Lagos, Nigeria. It is noteworthy that of the 192 arrested in the sting operation, 148 were Chinese. The report added; even as 40 Filipino nationals were earlier arrested in December 2024 in what authorities called an organised network in which foreigners collaborated with Nigerian recruits to carry out romance and crypto-currency investment scams (BBC, 2025).

The Economic and Financial Crimes Commission in August 2025, carried out a sting operation at a hotel within the precincts of the former President Olusegun Obasanjo Presidential Library in Ogun State where all the 93 suspected internet fraudsters arrested were linked to various cybercrime offences such as impersonation, identity theft and internet fraud based on their profiles. The arrest was effected at a pool party the yahoo boys organised to celebrate their illicit exploits (Punch, 2025). The EFCC linked the above surging cybercrime cases in Nigeria to rising unemployment, the quest for quick wealth among the youths, a large informal economy and weak regulatory frameworks (BBC, 2025).

In Nigeria, the majority of investment scams are conducted via phony websites that are created and run by scammers. These people lure victims to these websites and persuade them to invest money in fraudulent businesses by making unrealistic promises of high Returns On Investment (ROI) in incredibly short amounts of time. With claims of up to 100% returns in a single week, the alleged ROIs can reach remarkable heights (Evans-Ibe, 2023, referenced in Nwobodo, 2024). For instance, Operatives of the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission, (EFCC), reported on 3rd September, 2025, of an arrest of one AhambaTochukwu, Chief Executive Officer, CEO, Gavice Logistics Limited for allegedly defrauding several investors in his logistics investment schemes to the tune of N2,000,000,000 (two billion naira only) (EFCC, 2025).

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Revealing further, the EFCC reports says Tochukwu, through Gavice Logistics Limited, had in 2024, rolled out elaborate investment plans spanning haulage, courier and e-commerce services and dangled fifty percent Returns On Investment, (ROI) to his investors. However, since November 2024, Tochukwu disappeared into thin air with his investors' funds (EFCC, 2025). Similar examples of Ponzi schemes which have defrauded some gullible Nigerians running into billions of naira in recent times include the MMM, F&B and FNM.

Additionally, Business Email Compromise (BEC) scams are another complex scheme used by Nigerian Yahoo boys. These scams entail using sophisticated software to gain access to an organisation's official email accounts, stealing business communications, and starting financial transactions under the pretense of victim organisations (Evans-Ibe, 2023, cited in Nwobodo, 2024).The foregoing may have led Ibrahim Magu, the former Chairman of the EFCC, to counsel young people engaged in cyber fraud to think about the consequences of their actions not only for their personal future but also for the nation's economy and reputation (Onota, 2021).

The phenomenon of "Yahoo boys" is contrary to African cultural values, even though it can be linked to underlying socio-economic and political factors in Nigeria, such as poor governance, high unemployment rates, and disadvantaged backgrounds, which drive young people to engage in such activities as a means of survival (Nwobodo, 2024). Sadly, despite social media videos and regular news reports of horrific killings and other crimes committed by arrested Yahoo boys, many people no longer view them as deviants in the traditional sense (Ogunro, 2023).Illegal activities like financial crimes such as internet fraud and illegal drug trafficking are now viewed as legitimate endeavors to secure one's livelihoods due to the country's poor living conditions and limited opportunities for social advancement, which are linked to structural inequalities (Cockayne & Williams, 2009; Felbab-Brown, 2010; Virk, Nelson & Dele-Adedeji, 2024).

Thus, one of the several indications of Nigerian society's moral decay is the rise and acceptance of the Yahoo boys' subculture (Oloworekende, 2019, cited in Ochuko & Ene, 2024). Additionally, decades of corruption, poverty, and unemployment are thought to foster the unfortunate acceptance of Yahoo Yahoo activities among a sizeable proportion of the populace (Kolawole, 2020). As a result, the seemingly non-rebuttal and acceptance of Yahoo boys by society is invariably legitimising and promoting the Yahoo Yahoo phenomenon among Nigerian youths (Ochuko & Ene, 2024).

Conclusion

From the exposition of this paper, it is quite obvious that Nigeria is beset by persistent youth unemployment and the trend is only expected to worsen as thousands of graduates are rolled out each year without adequate employment opportunities for the majority of them (Ita & Bassey, 2022). Since young people are typically thought to be energetic and adept at using technology to indulge in some of the vices mentioned above, this always suggests that many vices, including internet fraud and related themes, will increase in Nigeria. Thus, given the foregoing, it is believed that if the youths are truly empowered to engage in useful ventures, the level of societal crimes such as internet fraud and associated vices will be reduced to the barest minimum. This submission aligns with the theoretical

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framework of this paper – the strain theory that where people are under pressure by the social system, as a result of inability to afford material possessions or basic necessities of life, they are compelled to come up with "innovative" solutions to their problem. To this end, they might extort money, sell drugs, steal or indulge in internet fraud as the case with the yahoo boys' activities owing to the frustrations arising from structural inequalities breeding unemployment.

Recommendations

1. Since major findings revealed the yahoo boys syndrome in Nigeria to be largely a function of the prevailing youth unemployment in the country, it is therefore, recommended that the Nigerian government should make concerted efforts in containing the high rates of youth unemployment in the country. It is commendable that, the Nigerian government has approved Agenda 2050 (Vanguard, 2023; Aigbovbioisa, Amupitan& Peter, 2025); which aims to drastically reduce among others, unemployment, poverty and inequality. Although the Federal Government is seen to be moving in this direction already with its recent announcement of plans to train more than 30,000 youths under the second cohort of the Innovation Development and Effectiveness in the Acquisition of Skills (IDEAS) and Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) initiative (The Nation, 2025), this effort must be encouraged and sustained in the intent and purpose of it.

2. Although no amount of justifications can be mounted in defence of Yahoo boys' nefarious activities in Nigeria, governments at all levels of the country must administer their constitutional responsibilities as enshrined in section 14(2b) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 1999 (as amended) stipulating security and welfare of citizens as the primary reason for the existence of government.

3. The Nigerian Cybercrime Prohibition, Prevention Act of 2024 (as amended) need to be reappraised further to effectively deter perpetrators. The United Kingdom recently reaffirmed its commitment to deepening cooperation with Nigeria in tackling the growing threat of cybercrime and digital insecurity, pledging technical support and intelligence sharing under an ongoing security partnership (Punch, 2025).

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