

Youth Cybercrime, Peer Networks, and Digital Deviance in Urban Lagos: A Social Learning Perspective

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.1308000132>

Received: 21 August 2026; Accepted: 26 August 2026; Published: 08 September 2026

ABSTRACT

Youth cybercrime has emerged as a significant social and security challenge in urban Nigeria, yet explanations that focus primarily on economic deprivation and technological access often overlook the social processes through which cybercriminal behaviour is learned, normalized, and sustained. This study examines the role of peer networks in shaping youth involvement in cybercrime in urban Lagos from the perspective of Social Learning Theory. The study adopted a qualitative case study design and drew on data from focus group discussions and key informant interviews involving youths and relevant community, educational, and law-enforcement stakeholders in selected urban areas of Lagos State. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring patterns in participants' accounts of peer influence, digital socialization, behavioural modelling, reinforcement, and the normalization of cybercrime. Findings indicate that peer networks constitute important informal learning environments in which young people are introduced to cybercrime techniques, acquire knowledge about fraudulent practices, develop shared vocabularies and identities, and receive social and material reinforcement for deviant behaviour. Participants further identified social media platforms and popular culture as extending these learning processes beyond physical peer groups by exposing young people to conspicuous consumption, successful cybercriminal personas, and narratives that portray fraudulent wealth as legitimate achievement. The study also found that perceived social acceptance, peer recognition, and the demonstration of financial success can reinforce continued participation, while weak condemnation within families and communities reduces the perceived stigma associated with cybercrime. The study concludes that youth cybercrime in urban Lagos should be understood not only as an individual or technological problem but also as a socially learned form of digital deviance embedded in peer relations and wider cultural environments. It recommends preventive interventions centred on positive peer mentorship, digital ethics education, community-based social learning, responsible media representation, and youth-oriented economic opportunities.

Keywords: youth cybercrime, peer networks, digital deviance, Social Learning Theory, social media, Lagos, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital connectivity across sub-Saharan Africa has generated unprecedented economic and social opportunities. Nigeria, now one of Africa's largest digital markets, has experienced significant growth in internet penetration and mobile connectivity (Nigerian Communications Commission [NCC], 2023). Lagos State, as the country's commercial and technological hub, sits at the centre of this digital transformation. However, parallel to this expansion has been a marked rise in cyber-enabled crimes, particularly online fraud schemes popularly known as "Yahoo Yahoo" (EFCC, 2023). Young adults constitute the dominant demographic involved in cybercrime activities in Nigeria (Ebelogu et al., 2019; Nwosu & Alinnor, 2024). Despite increased enforcement efforts by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), cybercrime continues to expand in sophistication and scale (Adam et al., 2025; Ibrahim & Daramola, 2022; Uchime et al., 2024). While legal and technological perspectives dominate policy discourse, emerging scholarship argues that youth cybercrime must be understood within broader socio-cultural and structural contexts (Edeh & Aluko, 2020; Okafor & Ajayi, 2021).

Urban Lagos presents a particularly instructive case. As a city characterised by stark economic inequality and intense status competition, Lagos reflects the contradictions of rapid modernisation in a postcolonial urban environment. In this context, material success has increasingly become a central marker of identity, legitimacy, and social recognition (Obasi & Ekong, 2021; Onah & Ogwuche, 2024). Visible consumption, luxury vehicles, designer fashion, and expensive gadgets function as symbolic capital within youth peer networks (Ojieleze & Adenuga, 2025). Simultaneously, structural barriers limit legitimate pathways to upward mobility. Nigeria continues to experience high youth unemployment and underemployment rates (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2023). Studies consistently link economic exclusion and unemployment to increased vulnerability to cybercrime participation (Edeh & Aluko, 2020; Adetunji & Ifedayo, 2022). The disjunction between culturally prescribed success and structurally available means produces strain, frustration, and perceived injustice.

General Strain Theory (Agnew, 1992) provides a robust explanatory framework for understanding this dynamic. The theory posits that individuals experience strain when they are unable to achieve socially valued goals through legitimate channels of action. When strain is perceived as unjust and persistent, it generates negative emotional responses that increase the likelihood of deviant adaptation. Within contemporary Lagos, wealth acquisition and lifestyle visibility function as dominant cultural goals, yet access to conventional means remains unevenly distributed. Cybercrime, particularly online fraud, can thus be interpreted as an innovative adaptation to structural strain. Research on Nigerian youth offenders suggests that many rationalise cybercrime as a means of survival, compensation for inequality, or a response to systemic corruption (Ibrahim & Eze, 2022; Okafor et al., 2021). This framing aligns with strain theory's assertion that blocked opportunity structures may lead individuals to adopt illegitimate but culturally rewarding alternatives.

Beyond structural strain, digital media ecosystems intensify relative deprivation. Social media platforms amplify exposure to curated images of wealth, success, and celebrity lifestyles, heightening comparison and aspirational pressure. Relative deprivation theory suggests that perceived inequality, rather than absolute poverty, generates resentment and motivation for deviance. In Lagos, visible contrasts between affluent elites and economically marginalized youth intensify status competition across neighbourhoods such as Surulere and Ikeja.

Cybercrime has become more normalized among certain youth cultures, with influences from popular music, social media influencers, and peer networks that often present digital fraud as a form of creativity rather than wrongdoing. This shift in perception diminishes moral outrage and supports rationalisation theories aligned with moral disengagement, as proposed by Bandura (2020). Such societal changes contribute to a landscape where unethical behaviours are increasingly accepted. This study investigates how materialist value orientations and experiences of relative deprivation affect youth engagement in cybercrime within urban Lagos. It conceptualises youth cybercrime through the lens of strain processes shaped by the burgeoning digital economies across African societies. The findings offer noteworthy contributions to three primary academic domains: firstly, it broadens the application of General Strain Theory to encompass the digital landscapes in Africa; secondly, it merges elements of materialism and digital visibility into criminological discussions surrounding deviance; and thirdly, it contests prevailing narratives that stress punitive measures, instead spotlighting structural and socio-cultural factors motivating cybercrime. To effectively mitigate cybercrime in Nigeria, the research advocates for comprehensive structural reforms aimed at tackling youth unemployment and inequality, alongside fostering a transformation in normative values, rather than relying predominantly on punitive enforcement strategies.

General Strain Theory and Economic Aspiration

General Strain Theory (GST), introduced by Robert Agnew in 1992, revises previous formulations of strain by suggesting that criminal behaviour emerges from a variety of negative stimuli and obstructed aspirations rather than solely from economic setbacks. GST delineates three key sources of strain: the failure to achieve positively valued goals, the removal of positive stimuli, and exposure to negative stimuli. In a societal context that venerates material success, as seen in Lagos, Nigeria's financial hub, individuals' frustrations grow particularly acute when they cannot attain wealth. The cultural narrative surrounding rapid financial success, luxurious consumption, and elevated social status fosters a landscape where young people experience significant psychological strain arising from unmet societal expectations. The juxtaposition of aspirational

cultural norms with real structural limitations, such as high unemployment rates among youth, restricted upward mobility, and uneven economic development, exacerbates feelings of relative deprivation. This concept of relative deprivation, distinguishing it from absolute poverty, captures a young person's perception of disadvantage in relation to peers within the same community. For instance, the visible wealth in affluent neighbourhoods like Lekki only heightens these feelings of inadequacy. According to GST, such strain inevitably leads to adverse emotional responses, including anger, frustration, and resentment, which may propel individuals towards deviant coping mechanisms. In the digital age, these negative emotions can be perpetuated through online peer networks that promote alternative paths to wealth.

Materialism serves as a significant cultural strain amplifier by equating personal value with economic possessions. In societies driven by consumerism, personal identity is increasingly expressed through the acquisition of material goods. Social media further exacerbates this phenomenon by providing incentives, such as likes and shares, for demonstrations of wealth. In Nigerian youth culture, particularly within certain urban enclaves, the rise of the "Yahoo Yahoo" phenomenon epitomises this trend, where acts of fraud are framed positively as cleverness and resourcefulness, with cybercriminals celebrated for their resilience. Under GST, these trends illustrate a precarious shift; when legitimate opportunities appear unattainable or inadequate, youths may increasingly rationalise illicit actions, viewing cybercrime not as immoral but as a vital means of survival and compensation for their systemic exclusion from opportunities.

Relative Deprivation in Hyper-Visible Urban Spaces

Urban inequality in Lagos manifests in a spatially concentrated manner, characterised by a stark contrast between luxury real estate, high-end educational institutions, and elite commercial areas, juxtaposed against the backdrop of under-resourced communities. This juxtaposition leads to daily incidences of comparative exposure among residents. Digital platforms further amplify these disparities, enabling local youth to engage with global influencer economies, thereby extending comparisons beyond their immediate geographical contexts. For instance, young individuals in Surulere, when observing their peers in Lekki who exhibit overt signs of wealth, experience a narrowing psychological gap between aspiration and reality, although this wealth remains ultimately out of reach. This proximity, without the means to access such lifestyles, fosters heightened feelings of frustration and relative deprivation.

Moreover, the GST indicates that deviance among urban youth is more likely when the strain they experience is perceived as unjust, of high magnitude, suffers from low social control, and is reinforced by deviant peers. All these factors are present in Lagos's youth environment, exacerbating the potential for deviant behaviour. Cybercrime emerges as a notable adaptive coping mechanism in this context. It possesses unique characteristics that make it appealing, including lower physical risks than traditional street crime, the potential for significant financial rewards, anonymity afforded by digital platforms, validation from peers within the cyber realm, and a perception of moral flexibility around such activities. Participants in qualitative studies often describe their engagement in cyber fraud as temporary or strategically justified due to the entrenched inequality around them. This cognitive reframing aligns with the "neutralisation techniques" described in strain theory literature, illustrating how such acts are rationalised within their societal context. Consequently, cybercrime is perceived not merely as a form of technological deviance but rather as a structured and adaptive behaviour influenced by cultural materialism and the persistent state of relative deprivation.

LITERATURE

Cybercrime as Socially Embedded Deviance

Cybercrime has evolved from being understood as a purely technical violation into a complex socio-economic phenomenon deeply embedded within broader societal structures. Rather than existing in isolation, cybercriminal activities are increasingly shaped by cultural norms, economic conditions, and shifting patterns of social interaction within digitally mediated environments. Early scholarship on cybercrime tended to adopt a narrow focus, concentrating primarily on opportunity structures, technological vulnerabilities, and the challenges faced by law enforcement agencies in detecting and prosecuting online offences (Wall & Williams,

2020). Within this framework, cybercrime was largely conceptualised as a function of access to digital tools and the absence of effective regulatory mechanisms.

However, contemporary academic perspectives have significantly expanded this understanding. More recent work, particularly by Holt and Bossler (2020), emphasises the importance of situating cybercrime within its social and cultural contexts. This approach foregrounds the role of human agency, socialisation processes, and digital subcultures in shaping cybercriminal behaviour. Rather than viewing offenders as purely rational actors exploiting technical loopholes, this perspective examines how motivations are constructed through peer networks, online communities, and shared cultural meanings that normalise or legitimise illicit activities.

Central to this shift is the recognition that cybercrime is often embedded in networked social environments where knowledge, skills, and techniques are collectively produced and circulated. Individuals do not typically operate in isolation; instead, they participate in loosely organised digital networks that facilitate learning, collaboration, and identity formation. These networks contribute to the emergence of distinct cybercriminal subcultures in which participation can confer status, economic reward, and a sense of belonging. As such, cybercrime becomes not only an economic activity but also a socially mediated practice shaped by interaction, imitation, and reinforcement. This socially grounded perspective enables a more nuanced and holistic understanding of cybercrime by linking individual behaviour to broader structural and cultural conditions. In contexts such as Lagos, where economic inequality, youth unemployment, and digital aspiration intersect, cybercrime can be interpreted as both a livelihood strategy and a form of social adaptation to constrained opportunities. By moving beyond purely technical explanations, this approach highlights the need to analyse cybercrime through interdisciplinary lenses that incorporate sociology, criminology, and political economy. Ultimately, it underscores that effective responses to cybercrime must address not only technological vulnerabilities but also the underlying social and economic drivers that sustain it.

Youth engagement in cybercrime is influenced by their deep familiarity with digital technologies and the interplay between digital opportunities and their social aspirations, as noted by Leukfeldt & Yar (2020). Research highlights a significantly higher occurrence of online fraud and economic cyber deviance among young individuals, particularly in societies facing widening gaps between cultural goals and legitimate economic opportunities (Button & Cross, 2021). Studies in Western contexts reveal that perceptions of economic exclusion strongly correlate with participation in financially motivated online crimes. This trend, as expressed by Ngo & Paternoster (2021), is notably evident in settings where peer norms and digital subcultures encourage risk-taking and a disregard for established rules. These cybercrime trends emphasise the nature of socially linked behaviour rather than isolated incidents of technical exploitation. This viewpoint is consistent with larger criminological theories that take into account the underlying disparities, societal influences, and moral negotiations that shape such behaviours. It implies that cybercrime reflects broader societal issues and should be addressed in terms of social dynamics rather than merely technology and criminality.

Materialism, Consumer Culture, and Deviance

Materialism, viewed as a psychological and cultural construct, emphasises the importance of wealth, possessions, and conspicuous consumption in shaping an individual's self-worth and social identity, as defined by Flynn Goldsmith & Pollite (2016). In contemporary digitally mediated societies, the influence of materialism has intensified due to social media platforms that transform lifestyle displays into demonstrations of success. These social networking sites contribute to this phenomenon by rewarding visibility and consumption with social capital, a concept quantified through metrics such as likes, follows, and overall engagement, as noted by Marwick (2018). Recent empirical research highlights a concerning link between materialistic value orientation and various forms of deviant behaviour, particularly unethical conduct in online environments. A significant study conducted by Barlett and Anderson (2021) established a strong positive correlation between materialism and online deviance among youth in digital cultures across different countries. Their findings indicate that individuals who prioritise material wealth often disregard ethical boundaries in the pursuit of status, especially within digital subcultures where visual recognition plays a crucial role in identity formation. Additionally, a study by Nguyen and Luong (2023) examined the relationship between consumerist pressures and economic deviance among digitally active youth in emerging market contexts. Their research reveals that when conventional pathways to success are restricted, digital

platforms that offer quick visibility and potential for wealth become attractive options, leading young individuals to engage in illicit activities. This body of work underscores the significant influence of materialism on ethical decision-making and the allure of digital realms as alternative means to achieve success amidst challenging socioeconomic conditions (Leukfeldt & Holt, 2020). Materialism serves a dual function in society, acting both as an aspirational standard and a driving force that diminishes psychological obstacles to behaviour deemed deviant. In modern societies interconnected through technology, these dynamics are intensified by digital platforms that favour visible displays of wealth and status over moral considerations.

Relative Deprivation and Urban Inequality

Relative deprivation theory, introduced by Runciman in 1966, suggests that feelings of injustice and frustration arise from perceived disparities between individual expectations and comparisons within society. This theory differs from absolute poverty models by focusing on relational perceptions of disadvantage rather than just economic status. Urban areas that exhibit significant visual inequalities, where extreme wealth coexists with widespread marginalisation, provide an especially ripe context for the experiences of relative deprivation. Furthermore, research conducted by Wilkinson and Pickett in 2018 highlights a striking correlation between income inequality and deviant behaviour across different societies. Their findings indicate that nations with greater income dispersion tend to observe a higher incidence of behaviours deemed deviant, including forms of economic crime. This highlights the societal implications of economic disparities and the psychology behind individuals' perceptions of their social standing.

Digital environments significantly enhance the dynamics of social comparison, particularly through social media. Research by Van Deursen et al. (2020) shows that engagement with these platforms can lead to an increase in upward social comparisons, resulting in negative self-assessment and overall dissatisfaction among users. Social media serves as a catalyst for perceived inequalities, as it allows users to easily access and view curated images that showcase wealth and status, thereby heightening feelings of deprivation. Hargittai and Marwick (2022) further support this notion by highlighting how algorithmic amplification of aspirational content places additional psychological pressure on young individuals, compelling them to align their socioeconomic status with those they perceive as more successful. This scenario becomes increasingly problematic when individuals believe that their prospects for advancement are either blocked or unfair, as it exacerbates feelings of relative deprivation and contributes to psychological strain at both individual and collective levels.

Nigerian Youth Cybercrime Landscape

Structural Challenges and Economic Exclusion

In Nigeria, certain structural conditions exacerbate strain and relative deprivation among the population, notably high unemployment and underemployment rates, particularly affecting the youth demographic. The National Bureau of Statistics (2023) reports that urban Lagos faces youth unemployment rates exceeding 30%. Many graduates struggle to secure stable employment and often find themselves in precarious, informal job sectors, which typically offer limited opportunities for advancement. Research by Edeh and Aluko (2020) highlights a significant correlation between economic precarity among Nigerian youth and their involvement in cyber-enabled crimes, specifically Internet fraud and phishing. The findings imply that in the absence of adequate absorption into formal labour markets, digital deviance becomes an alternative means of achieving financial stability for educated young individuals.

Adetunji and Ifedayo (2022) highlight critical dynamics regarding the interplay between unemployment and economic exclusion, asserting that these factors significantly enhance the appeal of cybercrime as a means of survival. They argue that such structural conditions foster a scenario where the ambitions of the youth, influenced by their socio-economic realities, intersect with their access to digital technology. This convergence shapes the behaviours of the youth, positioning cybercrime as a viable strategy for those facing aspirational strain in the context of limited economic opportunities.

Cultural Normalisation and Peer Reinforcement

Studies on cybercrime in Nigeria highlight the profound impact of cultural narratives and peer influences in legitimising illegal digital behaviours. Research by Obasi and Balogun (2021) emphasises the pivotal role of entertainment media in showcasing wealth, often without scrutinising its origins. This phenomenon fosters aspirational norms among urban youth, as the portrayal of success, especially when linked to fraudulent activities, becomes a common theme. Their examination of popular media, including music videos, films, and various online platforms, reveals that the glorification of success associated with fraud significantly contributes to the increasing acceptance and normalisation of cybercrime within Nigerian society. Through these media portrayals, the societal narrative shifts, making cybercrime appear not only attractive but also a viable route for success, thus reinforcing its prevalence among the youth.

Chikwe and Adebayo (2024) explore the influence of social networks on the acquisition of cybercrime knowledge and techniques, emphasising that these aspects are socially mediated. Their research highlights how peer groups not only enhance technical competencies related to cybercrime but also propagate narratives that seek to rationalise deviant behaviour. These findings support the principles of Social Learning Theory, suggesting that young individuals assimilate behaviours within their social environments, which tend to reward both risk-taking and economic creativity. This interplay between social interaction and learning is critical in understanding the dynamics that underpin youth involvement in cybercrime.

Institutional Responses and Deterrence Challenges

Institutional gaps significantly contribute to the weakening of normative standards, as discussed by Ibrahim and Daramola (2022). They highlight that the presence of weak enforcement regimes, inconsistent prosecution of offenders, and perceptions of corruption within law enforcement undermine deterrent effects against cybercrime. This situation fosters a sense of cynicism among the youth in Nigeria, leading them to view deviant behaviour as a justified response to the inefficiencies and perceived inequities within state institutions. Their analysis of Nigeria's anti-cybercrime measures illustrates that when citizens perceive state institutions as compromised, it can legitimise their rationalisation of criminal activities as forms of resistance to systemic failures.

Integrating Strain Theory into Cybercrime Research

Integrating Strain Theory with cybercrime scholarship involves understanding the heightened impact of digital environments on both structural pressures and individuals' subjective experiences of strain. Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST) posits that the effects of strain are amplified when societal goals are culturally prominent, yet access to legitimate means for achieving these goals is limited. Research supports this view in digital spheres; for instance, a study by Moon et al. (2020) identified a correlation between economic strain and participation in online fraud, indicating that such strain is mediated by emotional reactions like anger and frustration. This relationship highlights that strain not only drives deviant behaviour but also influences the cognitive justifications that can diminish moral constraints on individuals. In Nigeria, particularly in Lagos, there is a pronounced cultural emphasis on wealth that significantly influences the perceptions and aspirations of the youth. This phenomenon is heightened by the frequent exposure to narratives of material success through various media, both offline and online. As a result, young people in Lagos are increasingly confronted with a stark contrast between their aspirations and the realistic outcomes within their reach, thereby amplifying feelings of disparity and unfulfilled desires. This dynamic not only shapes individual ambitions but also reflects broader societal issues related to economic inequality and aspiration in contemporary Nigerian culture.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Materialism as Moral Currency: Status Anxiety and the Strain of Visibility

The findings indicate that in Lagos, material success is perceived as a moral currency necessary for social legitimacy among urban youth. Focus group participants emphasised that possessions such as expensive gadgets and designer clothing are crucial for earning respect, extending even into formal settings like churches

and schools. This reflects a societal expectation of materialism, driven by the perception that it legitimises one's status rather than being simply a matter of personal choice. Analysing this through the lens of Strain Theory, as proposed by Merton (1938) and Agnew (1992), reveals a structural disjunction: while society promotes goals related to wealth and lifestyle success, the means to achieve these aims are not equitably available. The urban economy of Lagos, characterised by youth unemployment, precarious informal labour, and increasing inequality, exacerbates the pressure on individuals to attain a form of success that is socially validated, reflecting deep-rooted challenges within the societal framework.

This study expands on strain theory by illustrating how digital visibility exacerbates strain. It suggests that social media environments foster a continuous environment for upward social comparisons, where the curated presentation of success on these platforms reinforces feelings of relative deprivation. According to Van Deursen et al. (2020), the dynamics of social comparison are intensified by social media, leading to increased dissatisfaction among users who engage with aspirational content. In the context of Lagos, this phenomenon of digital exposure is compounded by existing physical urban inequalities, resulting in a dual-layered strain characterised by both economic exclusion and the pressure of performative visibility.

Participants' statements, such as "If legit hustle doesn't pay, boys will find a way online," exemplify the concept of adaptive innovation proposed by Merton (1938). In this view, cybercrime emerges as a rationalised reaction not necessarily linked to a criminal identity but as a response to perceived structural necessities. This phenomenon is not unique to one locale; similar trends have been noted globally. For instance, Moon et al. (2020) demonstrated that economic strain significantly correlates with engagement in online fraud among youth, a relationship mediated by emotions like frustration and anger. However, the context of Lagos introduces a distinct cultural element: the pursuit of wealth is not just a personal aspiration but a communal obligation essential for social recognition. This dynamic reframes the experience of strain into a collective sentiment woven into the fabric of youth culture in urban Lagos. Consequently, materialism in this context is not a mere consequence; it is deeply rooted in social structure, symbolism, and collective expectation.

Peer Networks, Digital Apprenticeship, and the Social Learning of Fraud

The findings reveal that participation in cybercrime is rarely an individual endeavour; instead, it is a phenomenon that is socially learned, collectively reinforced, and facilitated through digital means. Participants reported the existence of peer mentorship systems where techniques, scripts, and strategies for executing online fraud are disseminated via messaging platforms and informal gatherings. This observation aligns with Social Learning Theory, proposed by Bandura in 1977, which states that behaviour is acquired through the processes of observation, imitation, and reinforcement. In this regard, observation is facilitated by peers and influencers showcasing illicit wealth; imitation is fostered through structured entry into fraudulent networks; and reinforcement is provided through financial rewards and validation from peers. Additionally, research by Chikwe and Adebayo in (2024). corroborates this by showing that cybercrime knowledge circulates within peer clusters in Nigeria, where seasoned participants act as informal instructors. This structure echoes the apprenticeship models seen in organised cybercrime groups on a global scale, as noted by Décary-Héту and Dupont in (2019).

Participants in the study did not view cybercrime as a morally deviant act within their peer groups; instead, they characterised it as a "smart hustle." This perspective reflects a normalisation of cybercrime, wherein definitions that are favourable to deviance prevail over those that condemn it, aligning with differential association theories. Holt and Bossler (2020) assert that the occurrence of online deviance is more significantly influenced by social interactions than by individual pathology. The findings from Lagos reinforce this observation, indicating that a person's identity related to cybercrime is shaped by social contexts rather than being an inherent individual trait. Consequently, digital platforms serve not merely as technological tools but as social ecosystems that facilitate the dissemination of deviant behaviours.

Cultural Glorification and the Symbolic Reframing of Fraud

A notable feature of contemporary urban culture is the growing normalisation, and at times glorification, of illicit wealth, particularly as represented in popular media such as music videos, Nollywood films, and the

curated lifestyles of social media influencers. These cultural forms frequently project images of rapid wealth accumulation, luxury consumption, and transnational mobility, often without critical interrogation of the sources of such wealth. This phenomenon can be understood as a process of symbolic neutralisation; whereby cultural production legitimises or softens the moral boundaries surrounding illicit economic practices. In this sense, media representations do not merely reflect reality; they actively shape normative frameworks through which economic success is interpreted and pursued.

Moral Disengagement Theory provides a useful lens for analysing this dynamic. According to Albert Bandura (1999), individuals resolve cognitive dissonance associated with harmful or unethical behaviour through mechanisms such as moral justification, diffusion of responsibility, and minimisation of harm. In the Nigerian context, these mechanisms are evident in popular rationalisations of cyber fraud, for instance, the belief that victims (often located in the Global North) are faceless and therefore less harmed, or that systemic corruption legitimises alternative routes to wealth accumulation. Such narratives enable individuals to reframe cybercrime not as deviance but as a rational and even justified response to structural inequalities.

Cultural industries play a central role in amplifying these rationalisations. Nigerian popular culture, particularly elements of Nollywood and Afrobeats, has been critiqued for occasionally portraying internet fraudsters, commonly referred to as “Yahoo boys”, as resourceful, intelligent, and socially successful actors rather than as criminals (Ogunleye, 2019; Smith, 2022). When these representations circulate widely across digital platforms, they function as powerful mechanisms of social learning, reinforcing behavioural scripts and shaping aspirations among young audiences. This aligns with broader insights from Marwick (2018), who highlights how influencer cultures promote aspirational labour and conspicuous consumption, often detaching visible success from transparent or legitimate economic pathways.

Globally, concerns about influencer-driven cultures of visibility and consumption have intensified, particularly in relation to how they encourage performative wealth and status competition. In cities like Lagos, these dynamics are further intensified by structural conditions such as high youth unemployment, underemployment, and limited access to formal economic opportunities (National Bureau of Statistics, 2023). Within such a constrained environment, the visibility of luxury lifestyles, amplified through Instagram, TikTok, and other platforms, creates heightened pressures for social mobility and recognition.

For many young people, the gap between aspiration and opportunity becomes increasingly difficult to reconcile through legitimate means. As a result, glamorised deviance can emerge as an alternative aspirational pathway. The symbolic power of visible success, regardless of its origins, reconfigures social norms around legitimacy, effort, and reward. This reflects what can be described as a cultural economy of visibility, in which recognition, status, and belonging are mediated through digital display and consumption practices. Within this economy, illicit wealth can acquire social legitimacy if it is successfully converted into visible markers of success.

Ultimately, this phenomenon illustrates how cultural production does not merely mirror structural inequalities but actively intensifies them. By normalising certain pathways to wealth while obscuring structural barriers to legitimate mobility, media and digital cultures contribute to a feedback loop in which individual aspirations are continuously shaped and frustrated by systemic constraints. In this way, the intersection of cultural representation, digital visibility, and economic exclusion becomes central to understanding the motivations underpinning youth engagement in cybercrime in Lagos.

Relative Deprivation and Urban Proximity to Inequality

The urban landscape of Lagos presents a distinct spatial condition characterised by the juxtaposition of extreme wealth and persistent deprivation. Residents frequently encounter affluent districts, luxury vehicles, and elite lifestyles that are often situated close to low-income communities. This proximity leads to a sense of relative deprivation, as articulated by relative deprivation theory, which posits that feelings of dissatisfaction stem not solely from absolute poverty but from unfavourable social comparisons (Runciman, 1966). In the context of Lagos, such comparisons are incessantly reinforced through digital media, creating a constant awareness of disparity. Research by Van Deursen et al. (2020) illustrates that exposure to idealised lifestyles

online can exacerbate perceptions of deprivation, intensifying the awareness of urban inequality. This interplay between digital influence and visible socio-economic division highlights the complexities of social experience in Lagos.

Several participants in the study on youth cybercrime in Lagos emphasised that cybercrime acts as a tool to equalise opportunities for individuals who feel marginalised by societal systems. This viewpoint reveals an intricate mix of innovation influenced by social pressures and a moral rationalisation associated with perceived injustices. The dynamics of youth cybercrime are fundamentally shaped by four significant factors: economic marginalisation, a cultural inclination towards wealth accumulation, the exacerbation of inequality through digital means, and the tenuous legitimacy of institutional frameworks. These elements collectively contribute to a landscape where cybercrime emerges not only as an act of defiance but also as a perceived avenue for empowerment in an environment marked by systemic barriers and inequities.

Societal Complicity and Weak Normative Boundaries

Another critical theme in the text is the concept of indirect community endorsement regarding sudden wealth. Participants noted that families and local leaders frequently refrain from challenging new wealth if it contributes to the survival of households. This tendency suggests a decline in informal social controls that typically regulate community behaviour. According to social control theory, strong emotional connections, beliefs, and dedication within a community serve to deter deviant behaviour. Nonetheless, when communities derive material benefits from illicit gains, the established normative boundaries that guide acceptable conduct become considerably weakened.

Holt, Bossler & Seigfried-Spellar (2017) introduce the concept of pragmatic moral suspension, which suggests that economic hardship can overshadow ethical considerations in decision-making. This perspective challenges traditional deterrence-based models that presume a strong moral agreement within communities against crime. The study reveals that when individuals within a community view cybercrime as a necessary means of survival, the associated social stigma diminishes, leading to a normalisation of such activities. Consequently, cybercrime becomes intricately woven into the local moral economies, altering the dynamics of crime perception and enforcement within these contexts.

Institutional Distrust and Selective Enforcement

Participants discussed the challenges posed by inconsistent prosecution and widespread perceptions of corruption within law enforcement, which collectively hinder effective deterrence of crime. Central to deterrence theory is the idea that the certainty of punishment holds more significance than its severity; thus, when individuals perceive law enforcement as uncertain or possibly negotiable, the allure of engaging in criminal activity increases. In Nigeria's law enforcement not only perpetuates a culture of impunity but also exacerbates the persistent issue of cybercrime. Further comments from participants, such as "the police know the boys," reflect a troubling degree of institutional ambiguity that erodes public trust in law enforcement capabilities and mechanisms, raising concerns about their overall effectiveness.

Government corruption significantly erodes the moral authority necessary for effectively addressing youth deviance. The existence of corruption within elite societal members fosters a perception among young people that engaging in dishonest behaviours is permissible, mirroring the unethical actions of those in power. As a result, the credibility of institutions becomes a crucial structural factor that shapes and regulates deviant behaviours among youth, highlighting the interplay between societal corruption and the acceptance of such behaviours in the younger generation.

The findings collectively support a multi-level explanatory framework:

The document provides an in-depth examination of youth cybercrime in Lagos through a multi-level explanatory framework that integrates various socio-economic influences.

At the structural level, significant factors contributing to youth cybercrime include high youth unemployment, which restricts legitimate job opportunities, and economic exclusion that leaves marginalised groups without necessary resources. Additionally, visible inequality within society propels individuals towards illegal activities, compounded by weak institutional trust that erodes faith in legal and social systems. Culturally, societal attitudes play a crucial role. Materialism is seen as a key indicator of social worth, prompting individuals to engage in illicit activities to achieve financial success. The media's portrayal of wealth influences aspirations that often conflict with ethical standards, while prevalent narratives that glorify risky financial ventures amplify the appeal of cybercrime.

Socially, peer dynamics significantly affect the incidence of cybercrime. Youth are often integrated into apprenticeship networks that normalise criminal behaviour, fostering group reinforcement and collective identity around these illicit activities, thereby perpetuating a culture in which cybercrime is not only accepted but also encouraged. On a psychological level, individual motivations are shaped by relative deprivation, where young individuals perceive their situations unfavourably in comparison to their peers or media portrayals. Moral disengagement permits rationalisation of unethical actions, while adaptive rationalisation allows youth to justify their behaviours based on perceived social norms.

The analysis incorporates three theoretical frameworks: Strain Theory reveals the pressures resulting from structural conditions; Social Learning Theory explains how individuals acquire behaviours through social observation and imitation; and Relative Deprivation Theory outlines how social comparisons can drive individuals towards criminal acts. Ultimately, these interconnected frameworks demonstrate that youth cybercrime in urban Lagos is profoundly influenced by its social context, largely driven by structural limitations and cultural narratives rather than purely opportunistic decisions.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the root causes of youth cybercrime in urban Lagos, linking it to materialist social norms, structural inequality, and heightened feelings of relative deprivation exacerbated by digital connectivity. It posits that cybercrime emerges as an adaptive innovation in contexts where wealth is equated with moral worth and opportunities for legitimate success are scarce. The authors advocate for a shift from a technological determinism perspective to one grounded in social criminology. Utilizing a combination of strain theory, social learning theory, and the concept of relative deprivation, the research constructs a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay of cultural ambitions, economic exclusion, and peer pressures that contribute to the normalization of cyber fraud among youth in urban areas. This nuanced approach highlights the socio-economic dynamics that influence youth behaviours and the acceptance of cybercrime as a viable means of achieving status and financial gain.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The findings underscore the necessity for a comprehensive strategy in combating cybercrime, highlighting that punitive measures on their own are not adequate. Recommendations include creating employment opportunities for youth to alleviate structural pressures and implementing counter-narrative media initiatives to diminish the glamorization of fraud. Support for community-based programs aimed at restoring social norms is also essential. Furthermore, institutional reforms are critical for improving the credibility of law enforcement agencies engaged in cybercrime prevention. The integration of digital literacy programs that encompass ethical reasoning is proposed as crucial. Overall, the perspective champions a cultural, structural, and educational approach to cybercrime prevention, emphasizing the need to move beyond dependence on purely technological solutions.

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