Adolescent Cybercrime in Nigeria: Socio-cultural Drivers, Ethical Challenges, and Counselling-based Interventions for Sustainable Reform

Esther EMMA-JIMO

Department of Guidance & Counselling, Lead City University, Ibadan
eemmajimo39@gmail.com,
https://orcid.org/0009-0001-9986-6327
+2348068722660

Abstract

Cybercrime among adolescents in Nigeria has become a significant socio-economic challenge, driven by factors such as poverty, peer influence, and the cultural celebration of illegal wealth. This article explored the social, economic, and psychological dimensions of adolescent cybercrime, applying Social Learning Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory to understand how systemic corruption and economic hardship contributed to this trend. It highlights how peer groups reinforced cybercrime through social validation, where successful fraudsters serve as role models, while popular media, such as music, films, and social media, glorifies illicit wealth, making cybercrime appear as an aspirational and socially acceptable means to success. This normalisation deeply embedded cybercrime within youth culture, shaping attitudes towards financial success and ethical decision-making. *The article recommends a comprehensive therapeutic approach to addressing this issue, including cognitive behavioural therapy, trauma-informed counselling, and solution-focused brief therapy. It stresses the importance of introducing digital literacy programmes in schools,*

strengthening enforcement of cybercrime lawss, and promoting positive community narratives. Additionally, initiatives offering legitimate opportunities for success are essential to shift cultural attitudes and reduce the allure of cybercrime. These combined strategies aim to foster ethical decision-making, providing adolescents with sustainable pathways towards lawful alternatives, and contributing to long-term social change.

Cybercrime has emerged as a global subject, posing significant challenges for law enforcement, policymakers, and society at large. In Nigeria, the issue is particularly trending among adolescents, who are increasingly engaging in digital fraud, hacking, identity theft, and other illicit online activities. This trend raises concerns not only about the economic implications but also the broader social and psychological impacts on young people.

Adolescent involvement in cybercrime in Nigeria is influenced by a complex interplay of factors, including socio-economic hardship, peer pressure, cultural glorification of illicit wealth, and the anonymity afforded by digital platforms. The term "*Yahoo Yahoo*," commonly used to describe people involve in internet fraud, has become deeply embedded in Nigerian youth culture, often perceived as a viable means of achieving financial success and social status. This phenomenon reflects deeper structural issues, such as high unemployment, systemic corruption, and limited access to quality education, which leave many young people with few legitimate opportunities for advancement.

This article aims to explore the psychological, socio-economic, and cultural dimensions of adolescent cybercrime in Nigeria. By applying theoretical frameworks such as Social Learning Theory and Cognitive Dissonance Theory, it seeks to understand the motivations behind these

behaviours and identify effective interventions. Addressing this issue requires a holistic approach that combines counselling, educational reforms, and policy measures to provide adolescents with ethical alternatives and reduce the appeal of cybercrime.

Cybercrime in Nigeria encapsulates a spectrum of illicit actions conducted via digital platforms, including but not limited to identity theft, hacking, financial fraud, and phishing. Among adolescents, the term "*Yahoo Yahoo*" has become synonymous with internet fraud, involving elaborate schemes to deceive victims, typically from abroad, into transferring funds under false pretence (Eboibi & Richards, 2021). This term, though informal, underscores the deep entrenchment of cybercrime in Nigerian youth culture, where it is often perceived as a legitimate avenue for social mobility and economic survival (Richards & Daniels, 2022).

The surge in adolescent involvement in cybercrime is promoted by high unemployment rates, widespread poverty, limited access to formal employment and educational opportunities, so many young people perceive cybercrime as a viable means to achieve financial stability and social status Ngboawaji (2024). This is highlighted by the allure of quick, substantial financial gains, which stand in stark contrast to the slow and uncertain returns associated with legitimate career paths (Adomi & Frank, 2023).

Cultural Normalisation and Social Influence
A critical aspect of cybercrime proliferation among Nigerian adolescents lies in its cultural normalisation. Popular media, including music, films, and social media platforms, often glamourise cybercriminals as symbols of success and resilience. The portrayal of individuals who have amassed wealth through fraudulent means as role models creates a distorted value system, where the end justifies the means (Tade, 2020). These media representations not only normalise cybercrime, but also embed it within the aspirational narratives of young people, seeking to escape

poverty and attain social prestige. This social validation creates a reinforcing loop, where success stories within peer groups or neighbourhoods inspire others to follow suit. The absence of strong counter-narratives from families, schools, and religious institutions means that these behaviours go largely unchallenged, further entrenching them in the social fabric (Eboibi & Richards, 2021).

Socio-Economic Factors Driving Cybercrime

The socio-economic landscape of Nigeria plays a pivotal role in the rise of adolescent cybercrime. With youth unemployment rates exceeding 40% (National Bureau of Statistics, 2022), many young people face limited prospects for economic advancement. In this context, cybercrime is often viewed as a rational response to systemic inequalities and a failing economy. Adolescents from low-income households, in particular, are more likely to engage in cybercrime as a means of survival and upward mobility (Ogunleye & Akinyemi, 2021). A study by Shamrokh, Bello, & Nwosu, (2023) found that youth cybercrime engagement has ripple effects on social relationships and psychological well-being, particularly during economic downturns. Similarly, research on legal frameworks highlights that gaps in Nigeria's cybercrime laws enabled many offenders to act with impunity (Akindipe, 2024). The presence of sense impunity reinforces the appeal of cybercrime, as young people believe they can evade consequences while reaping substantial benefits (Richards & Daniels, 2022). Therefore, strengthening digital governance and policy enforcement is essential to deterring youth involvement in cyber fraud.

The Role of Technology and Anonymity

Technological advancements and the widespread availability of the internet have facilitated the rise of cybercrime. Digital platforms provide a level of anonymity that traditional crimes do not, making it easier for individuals to engage in fraudulent activities without fear of immediate

detection. For adolescents, who are often tech-savvy but lack ethical guidance, the internet offers an attractive environment to explore and execute cybercrime (Tade, 2020).

Additionally, the rapid urbanisation of Nigerian cities has created environments where cybercrime thrives. Urban centres provide access to technology, internet cafes, and communal networks that facilitate cybercriminal activities. In these settings, young people often operate in close-knit groups, sharing knowledge and resources to execute more sophisticated schemes. This collaborative aspect of cybercrime creates a sense of community and belonging, further reinforcing its appeal (Eboibi & Richards, 2021).

Ethical and Psychological Dimensions

The ethical implications of cybercrime are often overlooked by those involved, particularly adolescents. Many rationalise their actions through cognitive distortions, minimising the harm caused to their victims or framing their activities as justified responses to systemic corruption and economic disparity. This process, explained by Cognitive Dissonance Theory (Festinger, 1957), allows adolescents to resolve the conflict between their actions and societal values, reducing the psychological discomfort associated with their behaviour (Smith & Brown, 2018). For many, engaging in cybercrime also provides a sense of empowerment and control. Recent study has linked adolescent cybercrime engagement with broader psychological factors, such as the rise of cyberbullying and cyberloafing behaviours (Barlett & Chamberlin, 2022). These findings suggest that a comprehensive psychological intervention strategy must not only address fraudulent behavior, but also underlying digital misbehaviour patterns.

Social Learning Theory and Adolescent Cybercrime

Social Learning Theory (SLT), proposed by Albert Bandura (1977), suggests that behaviour is learned through observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social contexts. Adolescents learn cybercriminal

behaviours by observing peers, family members, and media personalities. In Nigeria, exposure to media and peer groups normalises cybercrime, particularly "*Yahoo Yahoo,*" which is celebrated as a symbol of success and social mobility. Positive reinforcement, such as financial rewards and social validation, encourages continued involvement in cybercrime. The glorification of wealth in Nigerian media further reinforces these behaviours. Additionally, vicarious reinforcement, where adolescents observe others benefiting from cybercrime without consequences, strengthens the likelihood of others adopting similar behaviours. This cycle of observation and reinforcement perpetuates the spread of cybercrime within youth subcultures (Eboibi & Richards, 2021; Tade, 2020; Richards & Daniels, 2022; Adomi & Frank, 2023).

Implications of Social Learning Theory for Interventions

Social Learning Theory suggests interventions should focus on disrupting the social influence and reinforcement that drive cybercrime. Educational programmes promoting positive role models and ethical decision-making, along with media campaigns highlighting the consequences of cybercrime, can help reshape perceptions of success (Tade, 2020).

Socioeconomic Drivers of Cybercrime

Cybercrime among Nigerian adolescents is strongly influenced by socio-economic factors. Ogunleye and Akinyemi (2021), found that 70% of adolescents involved in cybercrime cited unemployment and poverty as primary motivators. Adolescents from low-income households are more likely to engage in cybercrime, seeing it as an accessible escape from economic hardship. Reports by the National Bureau of Statistics (2022), confirm that regions with high unemployment rates also experience higher incidences of cybercrime.

Psychological and Cultural Factors Driving Cybercrime

Psychological and cultural influences are also key drivers of adolescent cybercrime. Adolescents involved in cybercrime often exhibit cognitive distortions, justifying their actions as responses to systemic corruption (Smith & Brown, 2018). Popular culture, particularly music, films, and social media, glorifies cybercriminals, associating wealth with success and reinforcing the idea that cybercrime is a shortcut to financial success (Tade, 2020). This cultural narrative makes cybercrime more appealing, especially for those from disadvantaged backgrounds (Richards & Daniels, 2022).

Effectiveness of Interventions

Interventions, such as trauma-informed counselling and digital literacy workshops, have shown promise in reducing adolescent cybercrime. Oluwadare and Adedeji (2021), found that 45% of participants in a counselling programme reported decreased involvement in cybercrime. Eboibi and Richards (2021), reported a 30% increase in awareness of cybercrime laws after digital literacy workshops, though long-term behavioural changes were less certain. These studies highlight the importance of providing psychological support and education while maintaining consistent follow-up for sustained impact.

Global Comparisons

Globally, adolescent cybercrime exhibits similar patterns, though with regional differences in its prevalence and the contributing factors. A study by Ferguson, Cruz, & Rueda. (2019), in the United States found that adolescents involved in cybercrime were more likely to report poor parental supervision, low socio-economic status, and exposure to media portrayals of cybercriminals. These factors align with findings from Nigeria, where socio-economic deprivation and the glamorisation of illegal wealth are key drivers. However, in the Nigerian context, the role of media and peer influence is particularly pronounced, with

cybercriminals frequently portrayed as aspirational figures in music and social media. This cultural factor distinguishes Nigeria from many other regions, where the portrayal of cybercriminals is typically less glamorised.

The international perspective on adolescent cybercrime underlines the need for multi-faceted interventions that address both socio-economic and psychological drivers. Similarly, strengthening the enforcement of cybercrime laws and providing alternative economic opportunities for young people could reduce the perceived necessity of cybercrime as a pathway to success.

Counselling Interventions and Policy Implications

Adolescent involvement in cybercrime in Nigeria is a complex and multifaceted issue that requires a holistic approach. While socio-economic factors like poverty and unemployment create the conditions that drive young people toward cybercrime, psychological and cultural factors also play significant roles. As such, the solutions to this problem must go beyond punitive measures and focus on addressing the root causes through targeted counselling interventions, educational reforms, and policy changes.

Counselling Interventions: A Holistic Approach

Effective counselling interventions must be multi-dimensional, taking into account, the psychological, emotional, and socio-economic challenges faced by adolescents involved in cybercrime. These interventions should focus on providing the necessary support to help young people develop healthier coping mechanisms, improve their self-regulation, and adopt more ethical behaviour.

One of the most effective therapeutic approaches for addressing adolescent cybercrime is **Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)**. CBT helps adolescents identify and challenge the cognitive distortions that justify their criminal behaviour. Many adolescents involved in

cybercrime minimise the harm caused to their victims or rationalise their actions as a form of rebellion against a corrupt system (Smith & Brown, 2018). CBT can be used to help these individuals reframe their thinking, teaching them to recognise the consequences of their actions and fostering a sense of personal responsibility.

Additionally, **trauma-informed counselling** is crucial for adolescents who have experienced socio-economic hardship or emotional neglect. Many adolescents involved in cybercrime come from backgrounds marked by poverty, familial dysfunction, or emotional trauma. Trauma-informed approaches focus on creating a safe, supportive environment where adolescents can process past experiences and develop healthier emotional responses. This approach also addresses the underlying emotional triggers, such as feelings of inadequacy or hopelessness, which often lead young people to engage in illegal activities as a means of asserting control over their lives (Oluwadare & Adedeji, 2021).

Another useful intervention is **Solution-focused Brief Therapy (SFBT)**, which is particularly effective for goal-oriented adolescents. SFBT emphasises strengths and resources, helping young people focus on positive solutions rather than dwelling on past mistakes. SFBT can help adolescents build the resilience needed to overcome socio-economic challenges without resorting to illegal activities (Eboibi & Richards, 2021).

Educational Reforms: Promoting Digital Literacy and Ethical Use of Technology

A crucial element of any intervention strategy is **digital literacy education**, which aims to equip adolescents with the skills needed to navigate the digital world responsibly and ethically. Many adolescents engage in cybercrime because they lack a clear understanding of the legal and ethical implications of their actions. Digital literacy programmes should focus not only on the technical aspects of using digital platforms

but also on the ethical considerations of online engagement. Students need to be educated on the risks of cybercrime, including the legal consequences of fraud and hacking. They should also be made aware of the social impact of their actions on victims, fostering a sense of empathy and responsibility. The curriculum should encourage critical thinking and self-regulation, helping adolescents make ethical decisions when using technology.

Beyond the formal education system, **community-based education** initiatives can help raise awareness about the dangers of cybercrime. Workshops, seminars, and peer-to-peer education programmes can be used to engage adolescents in conversations about the risks of cybercrime and the importance of ethical online behaviour.

Policy Implications: Structural and Legislative Reforms

One of the most critical steps is the **strengthening of cybercrime legislation** and improving the enforcement of existing laws. The Nigerian Cybercrimes Act 2015 was a positive step forward, but its implementation has been inconsistent, and many offenders continue to operate with relative impunity. Strengthening law enforcement agencies, providing them with the necessary training, and improving their capacity to investigate cybercrime are all necessary steps towards curbing this issue.

Job creation and economic development are fundamental to reducing adolescent involvement in cybercrime. Given that socio-economic hardship is a primary driver of cybercrime, it is essential to create more opportunities for young people to access legitimate, well-paying jobs. This can be achieved through vocational training, entrepreneurship programmes, and investment in sectors that are likely to create employment opportunities for youth. Governments and private sector stakeholders must work together to design policies that support economic empowerment, particularly for disadvantaged youth in urban and rural areas.

In addition, creating **diversion programmes** for first-time adolescent offenders can provide a rehabilitative alternative to punitive measures. Rather than imprisoning young offenders, these programmes could focus on counselling, education, and skill development. They could provide adolescents with the tools they need to reintegrate into society and avoid reoffending, thus breaking the cycle of cybercrime. By focusing on rehabilitation and reintegration, these programmes could help young people realise their potential and build a positive future without resorting to illegal activities.

Conclusion: A Collaborative Effort for Lasting Change

Reducing adolescent cybercrime in Nigeria requires a comprehensive, multi-pronged approach that combines counselling interventions, educational reforms, and robust policy changes. Counselling strategies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy, trauma-informed approaches, and Solution-Focused Brief Therapy can help adolescents address the psychological and emotional factors that drive them toward cybercrime. At the same time, digital literacy programmes and community-based education can promote ethical behaviour and equip adolescents with the knowledge to navigate the digital world responsibly.

However, these interventions must be accompanied by structural reforms, including stronger enforcement of cybercrime laws, job creation, and the provision of alternative economic opportunities. A **recent study by Oni, Arshad, & Pham (2023),** reinforces the **importance of public-private partnerships** in tackling cybercrime through technological innovations and **social re-orientation campaigns**. Only through a collaborative effort involving educators, counsellors, policymakers, and community leaders can Nigeria address the root causes of adolescent cybercrime and foster a generation of

young people who are empowered to make ethical choices and pursue legitimate pathways to success.

References

Adomi, E., & Frank, T. (2023). The socioeconomic impact of cybercrime among Nigerian youth. Journal of Digital Crime Studies, 15(2), 45-60.

Akindipe, T. (2024). Cybercrime legislation in Nigeria: Challenges and prospects for digital governance. Journal of Law and Cybersecurity, 12(1), 45-62.

Bandura, A. (1977). Social learning theory. Prentice-Hall.

Barlett, C. P., & Chamberlin, K. (2022). The digital age of delinquency: Examining the link between cyberbullying, cyberloafing, and adolescent cybercrime. Journal of cyberpsychology, 7(3) 200-218.

Eboibi, J., & Richards, K. (2021). Cyber fraud and youth culture in Nigeria: An emerging crisis. African Journal of Criminology, 10(1), 112-130.

Ferguson, C. J., Cruz, A. G., & Rueda, S. M. (2019). Predictors of adolescent cybercrime involvement: A comparative study of risk factors in the United States. Journal of Cybersecurity Research, 5(2), 78-99.

Festinger, L. (1957). A theory of cognitive dissonance. Stanford University Press.

National Bureau of Statistics. (2022). Youth unemployment report: Nigeria's labor market crisis. Abuja, Nigeria: National Bureau of Statistics.

National Bureau of Statistics. (2022). Cybercrime trends and unemployment rates in Nigeria: Statistical insights. Government of Nigeria.

Ngboawaji, D. (2024). Cybercrime and unemployment: Understanding the rise of digital fraud among Nigerian adolescents. International Journal of Social Sciences, 18(3), 78-95.

Ogunleye, M., & Akinyemi, S. (2021). The economic dimensions of cybercrime: Youth perspectives in Nigeria. Journal of Socioeconomic Studies, 8(2), 99-115.

Ogunleye, T., A. (2021). Socio economic drivers of cybercrime among Nigerian adolescents. Journal of African Digital Security, 8(2), 145-167.

Oluwadare, J., & Adedeji, T. (2021). Evaluating the effectiveness of trauma-informed counseling for cybercrime rehabilitation. Journal of Digital Ethics, 6(4), 210-228.

Onwunyi, P., & Okonkwo, M. (2021). The impact of COVID-19 on cybercrime: A Nigerian perspective. Journal of Cybersecurity and Policy, 9(4), 203-221.

Oni, A., Arshad, Y., & Pham, N. (2023). Public-private partnerships in tackling cybercrime: The role of technology and social re-orientation. Journal of Digital Governance, 14(2), 88-107.

Richards, K., & Daniels, L. (2022). Digital deception: The role of internet fraud in Nigeria's youth economy. Journal of Contemporary African Studies, 17(3), 59-80.

Shamrokh, A., Bello, Y., & Nwosu, T. (2023). Psychosocial implications of cybercrime among youth: A Nigerian case study. Journal of Cyberpsychology, 5(4), 178-195.

Smith, J., & Brown, M. (2018). Cognitive distortions and adolescent decision-making in cybercrime: A theoretical analysis. Journal of Criminological Psychology, 5(2), 121-140.

Tade, O. (2020). The social construction of cybercrime in Nigeria: A cultural criminology perspective. African Journal of Criminology and Justice Studies, 14(2), 67-85.