

Digital Morality And The Contagion Of Cybercrime Among Nigerian Youths

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I. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technology and social media in Nigeria has fundamentally reshaped how young people engage with morality, success, and social belonging. In a society marked by economic precarity and institutional distrust, the internet has emerged as both a stage for self-presentation and a site of moral experimentation. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter) have become key spaces where Nigerian youths negotiate visibility, recognition, and legitimacy. However, alongside the liberatory potential of digital participation, these platforms also foster forms of imitation and moral contagion that blur the boundary between ethical ambition and deviant aspiration.

Cybercrime—locally framed as “*Yahoo Yahoo*”—illustrates this moral complexity. What began as an act of deception and fraud has, in many youth circles, evolved into a symbol of digital intelligence and social defiance. The visibility of “Yahoo boys” on social media, often flaunting wealth and luxury, has contributed to a cultural redefinition of success, where the means of accumulation are less important than the appearance of prosperity. This transformation reflects a broader process of *digital moral negotiation*, where the ethics of work, wealth, and intelligence are reconstructed in response to the pressures and possibilities of online life.

This essay examines how the culture of social media produces a new form of *digital morality* among Nigerian youths—one that is shaped by contagion, imitation, and moral relativism. By applying Contagion Theory (Le Bon, 1895; Tarde, 1903) and the concept of the Moral Economy (Thompson, 1971; Zigon, 2007), the paper argues that the normalization of cybercrime can be understood not merely as criminal behaviour, but as a socially contagious moral adaptation to inequality and digital visibility. The argument situates cybercrime within a wider digital culture where success and moral worth are increasingly performed through online recognition, producing what might be called a *moral economy of hustle*.

II. Theoretical Perspectives

Contagion Theory and Digital Behaviour

Contagion Theory, developed in the late nineteenth century by Gustave Le Bon (1895) and refined by Gabriel Tarde (1903), describes how emotions, ideas, and behaviours spread rapidly within a collective. Le Bon argued that individuals in crowds lose rational self-control and become susceptible to the emotions and impulses of the group—a phenomenon he called *collective mind*. Tarde expanded this idea through his imitation theory, emphasizing that social life is governed by the repetition and replication of ideas. In contemporary media environments, contagion no longer depends on physical crowds; rather, it operates through *networked publics* (boyd, 2010), where digital connectivity enables the instant transmission of affect and behaviour.

Social media platforms exemplify this digital contagion. Algorithms amplify certain behaviours—such as displays of wealth, confidence, or success—by rewarding them with visibility and engagement. This creates a feedback loop in which imitation becomes both emotional and aspirational. Nigerian youths, immersed in online spaces saturated with images of affluence, often reproduce these aesthetics as moral and social goals. The *like*, *share*, and *retweet* functions are not just tools of communication; they are mechanisms of contagion that spread desire and normalize imitation (Miller et al., 2016).

In this sense, the contagion of cybercrime is less about direct participation in fraud and more about the moral and affective circulation of its symbols—luxury, cleverness, and defiance. The glamorization of “Yahoo boys” in popular culture (Adegoke, 2018) operates through digital contagion: repeated exposure to their lifestyles transforms moral perception, making illicit success appear admirable or even aspirational.

Moral Economy and the Ethics of Hustle

While contagion theory explains *how* ideas and behaviours spread, the moral economy concept clarifies *why* they resonate within specific socio-economic contexts. First articulated by E.P. Thompson (1971) and later extended by scholars like Zigon (2007) and Smith (2017), moral economy refers to the shared norms and justifications through which people evaluate fairness, justice, and survival in everyday life. In Nigeria, where systemic inequality and state corruption are pervasive, morality is often recalibrated according to what is perceived as “fair hustle.”

Within this framework, cybercrime is frequently rationalized as an act of digital redistribution—a form of moral compensation for structural injustice. Many young people see their actions not as immoral but as intelligent responses to an unfair system. As one youth respondent in my previous fieldwork noted, “*If the system doesn’t care about us, we’ll find our own way.*” This outlook reflects what Zigon (2007) calls *moral breakdown*: the moment when dominant ethical systems lose authority, prompting individuals to construct new moral logics based on lived experience.

In this digital moral economy, the ultimate virtue is *success*. The legitimacy of wealth is judged not by its source but by its visibility and scale. Online, morality is measured through aesthetics—luxury fashion, gadgets, travel, and social proof. These symbols circulate contagiously, generating both envy and aspiration. Thus, the moral economy of Nigerian youth is increasingly shaped by the *digital reproduction of desire*—a process that merges moral reasoning with algorithmic logic.

III. Digital Culture And Youth Moral Transformation

Digital culture in Nigeria has evolved into a dynamic space of creativity, performance, and moral experimentation. For many young people, social media is more than a communication tool—it is a cultural ecosystem that defines self-worth and belonging. Within this environment, the pursuit of *visibility* and *recognition* becomes central to identity construction. As McRobbie (2009) and Miller et al. (2016) argue, digital participation increasingly involves curating one’s image as a brand—a process that blurs the line between self-expression and performance.

For Nigerian youths, this performance often intersects with the ideology of *hustle*. The language of “hustle” carries moral undertones: it denotes resilience, ambition, and survival against systemic odds. However, in digital spaces, this notion has become detached from its ethical foundations. The moral value of hustle is no longer tied to hard work but to *results*, especially those visible online. A young man who posts pictures of luxury cars or expensive clothes is celebrated regardless of how those items were acquired.

This shift represents what Adeduntan (2020) calls the *aesthetics of visibility*—a social logic where being seen becomes synonymous with being successful. The digital space rewards spectacle over substance, creating a moral culture driven by appearances. Consequently, ethical reflection gives way to what Falola (2018) describes as *digital pragmatism*: the belief that social validation is proof of success, even when achieved through morally ambiguous means.

Participants from my earlier study frequently described how social media influences their moral decisions. One respondent noted:

“*If you post something nice, everyone likes and comments. If you try to do the right thing quietly, nobody notices. So people do what gets attention.*”

This observation highlights the *performative pressure* of social media. The digital public sphere has become a theatre of recognition where moral worth is performed rather than lived. This transformation aligns with Bauman’s (2000) notion of *liquid modernity*, in which identity and morality become fluid, constantly adapting to social validation and online trends.

The digital environment also collapses spatial and cultural distances, exposing Nigerian youths to global lifestyles that often contrast sharply with their economic realities. Through platforms like Instagram, young people engage with global luxury imagery, but without the structural means to achieve such comfort legitimately. This creates a moral dissonance: a gap between aspiration and possibility. Cybercrime, in this sense, becomes not just an economic act but a moral resolution—a way to align online fantasy with lived experience.

IV. The Contagion Of Success And The Normalization Of Cybercrime

The idea of success has become one of the most contagious moral ideas in the digital age. Every post, comment, or viral trend reproduces the message that visibility equals achievement. Within Nigerian digital youth culture, this contagion has redefined the relationship between morality and ambition.

Social media does not simply mirror existing values—it amplifies them, turning personal aspirations into collective desires. The “soft life” trend, for instance, celebrates luxury and comfort as the ultimate goals of life, often with little attention to the means of attainment. As Pescara-Kovach and Raleigh (2017) suggest, contagion thrives where visibility and emotion converge. The joy, admiration, or envy evoked by a successful post becomes the emotional fuel for imitation.

In the Nigerian context, *cybercrime* thrives in this emotional economy. Popular songs, memes, and skits glorify the ingenuity of “Yahoo boys” who “use their brain” to outsmart the system. The media portrayal of these figures transforms them into anti-heroes—symbols of defiance against a corrupt state. Their narratives spread contagiously, reshaping public perception of morality and crime.

One participant in my earlier fieldwork captured this normalization clearly:

“People don’t even see Yahoo boys as criminals anymore. They’re just guys who made it faster than others.”

This statement reveals the moral recalibration at play: legality becomes secondary to the social performance of success. The glorification of “Yahoo boys” represents what Durkheim (1912) would call a form of *anomie*—a breakdown of moral regulation in a society undergoing rapid change. Without consistent moral anchors, young people reconstruct ethical codes based on pragmatic reasoning: if the system is corrupt, then intelligence in exploiting it becomes admirable.

Music and popular culture further accelerate this contagion. Artists such as Naira Marley, Zlatan, and Portable use lyrics and imagery that blend humor, defiance, and wealth display, reinforcing the idea that breaking rules is part of being smart. These representations do not create deviance but legitimize it, offering moral validation for acts that were once condemned.

Digital algorithms also play a crucial role in this normalization. Social media platforms prioritize engagement, not ethics. As Howard (2019) notes, algorithmic systems amplify content that elicits strong reactions, whether positive or negative. In the Nigerian digital sphere, this means that flashy lifestyles, provocative posts, and controversial statements are more likely to trend, regardless of their moral implications. The algorithm thus becomes an invisible moral actor—one that rewards spectacle and punishes invisibility.

This algorithmic contagion explains why narratives of cybercrime spread so quickly and why they persist despite widespread condemnation. When moral attention is measured by clicks and shares, deviance becomes a form of cultural capital.

V. Reframing Morality In The Age Of Digital Visibility

The transformation of moral reasoning among Nigerian youths cannot be understood without considering the architecture of digital visibility itself. Social media platforms are not neutral spaces; they are designed to quantify attention, reward spectacle, and foster emotional engagement. This digital architecture turns morality into performance. The question is no longer “*What is right?*” but “*What gets seen?*”

In this new moral landscape, the *ethical self* is shaped through optics rather than conviction. As Baym (2015) observes, the social media user operates simultaneously as an audience and a performer—constantly curating the self for visibility and approval. Nigerian youths, navigating economic precarity and limited opportunities, have embraced digital visibility as a new form of social capital. Yet this visibility carries moral consequences. It reshapes value systems, privileging aesthetics and affect over integrity and introspection.

This dynamic produces what might be called a crisis of moral spectatorship. Acts that were once judged by internal conscience are now evaluated by public perception. For instance, a “Yahoo boy” flaunting wealth online may receive admiration, laughter, or envy—but rarely condemnation. The social response itself becomes the measure of morality. This echoes Zigon’s (2007) notion of moral improvisation, where individuals navigate ethical uncertainty through adaptive reasoning rather than fixed norms.

The constant exposure to curated images of success has also generated a sense of moral fatigue. Many young Nigerians express awareness that online lifestyles are exaggerated, yet they still feel pressured to replicate them. This ambivalence—knowing yet imitating—illustrates what Bauman (2000) calls the liquidity of modern ethics: morality is flexible, negotiable, and often subordinate to survival strategies.

In this context, morality becomes a tool for social navigation rather than a compass of virtue. Cybercrime, while legally condemned, is recoded within youth discourse as a strategic response to exclusion. The statement “everybody is hustling” captures this fluid moral rationalization. Hustle, in its digital form, represents both a survival ethic and a moral justification. The algorithmic amplification of hustle narratives reinforces the illusion that success, no matter how achieved, signifies intelligence and worth.

This digital reordering of morality invites a rethinking of how ethics function in networked societies. If moral contagion spreads through visibility and repetition, then interventions must address not only legal or moral education but also the digital infrastructures that mediate aspiration and recognition. The challenge, therefore, is not merely to condemn cybercrime but to understand the social and technological systems that make it *morally contagious*.

VI. Conclusion

The analysis in this essay demonstrates that cybercrime among Nigerian youths is more than a product of economic desperation or moral decay; it is a cultural manifestation of digital modernity. The convergence of

social media, inequality, and aspirational culture has produced a new moral order—one driven by visibility, contagion, and pragmatic justification.

Through the lenses of Contagion Theory and Moral Economy, we see that online behaviours are not isolated acts but socially transmitted moral performances. Social media amplifies desires and anxieties, turning success into a contagious moral ideal. In this ecosystem, cybercrime is reframed not merely as deviance but as participation in a digital moral economy that prizes ingenuity and audacity over ethical consistency.

The Nigerian digital sphere thus mirrors global patterns of moral transformation in an algorithmic age, while also revealing the specific local logics of youth resistance and adaptation. Addressing the contagion of cybercrime requires moving beyond criminalization to a deeper engagement with the moral and cultural meanings that sustain it. Only by understanding these new moral economies can we begin to articulate ethical frameworks that speak to the realities of young people living in digitally mediated worlds.

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