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From Campus Cultism to Cybercrime: Examining the Nature and Trends of Yahoo Yahoo Activities among University Undergraduates in Nigeria.

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[0219] Abstract

This study examines the emerging transition from campus cultism to cyber-enabled transnational organized crime (popularly known as Yahoo Yahoo) among university undergraduates in Nigeria. While cultism has historically constituted one of the major security challenges within Nigerian universities, evidence suggests that cybercrime has increasingly displaced it as the dominant form of organized criminality among students. The study investigates the nature, drivers, operational patterns, and implications of this transition for campus security, higher education, and national development. A mixed-methods research design was adopted, combining questionnaire surveys with Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) involving students, lecturers, university administrators, parents, and security personnel across selected public universities in Nigeria's six geopolitical zones. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistical techniques, while qualitative responses were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings reveal that cybercriminal networks among undergraduates have evolved into organized structures exhibiting recruitment patterns, leadership hierarchies, specialization of roles, and transnational linkages that mirror conventional organized criminal groups. The study further establishes that the declining prominence of campus cultism is not indicative of improved campus security but rather reflects a transformation of youth criminality from violent confraternities to technologically driven financial crimes motivated by the pursuit of rapid wealth, social status, and digital opportunities. The findings also demonstrate that the proliferation of cybercrime has weakened academic commitment, reinforced a culture of materialism and moral decline, exposed universities to criminal infiltration, and increasingly linked campus criminal networks with wider transnational criminal enterprises. The study concludes that Nigeria's universities are witnessing a significant shift in the character of organized crime, requiring a corresponding shift in institutional and national security responses. It recommends strengthening university governance, integrating cybercrime prevention into student orientation and curricula, enhancing collaboration between universities and security agencies, improving digital surveillance and intelligence gathering, and promoting value reorientation programmes capable of addressing the socio-economic and cultural drivers of cybercriminality among young people.

Keywords: Campus cultism, Cybercrime, Yahoo, Organized crime, University undergraduates, Campus security, Nigeria, Youth criminality.

1. Introduction

The menace of cultism has been one of the social vices among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria. As a consequence, it has continued to attract the attention and opinion of scholars and security experts. There is hardly any public tertiary institution in Nigeria today that has not witnessed the shocking and often fearsome activities of one cult group or the other, ranging from stealing and armed robbery, to extortion, intimidation, rape and sexual harassment, maiming and killings. The nefarious acts of these cult groups sharply contradict the ideal of the founding members of the first cult group in Nigeria – The Pyrates. Scholars are in agreement that the fundamental reason Wole Soyinka and six others known as the “magnificent seven” formed the first cult group at the prestigious University College, Ibadan in 1952 was to kick against colonial culture and elitist behaviour among the students, as well as to elevate

the social life of the university campus where orderliness and discipline could be planted in the mind of Nigerian students (Adejoro, 1995; Nnajieta, 2015; Ezema et al, 2017).

Its activities reverberated all the nooks and crannies of the institution, giving the group some kind of clout and popularity that attracted the most intelligent and politically conscious students to its fold. While the Pyrates remained the only cult group in Nigeria for about 20 years and did serve as an umbrella through which students opposed obnoxious policies Nigerian higher institutions, internal bickering and schism over the doctrine of the confraternity became a cataclysmic factor for the formation of another cult group – The Buccaneer; and so, started the proliferation of cultism in Nigerian tertiary institutions. With this came the completion for membership, space and dominance. Ultimately, the ideals of these groups were sacrificed on the unholy altar of “war of supremacy” as the groups resorted to armed violent clashes in order to suppress opposing cult groups. Overzealous Nigerian politicians and in some cases, Vice Chancellors surreptitiously engaged the services of some of these cult groups and armed them to counter-attack any perceived opposition. And this ignited the proliferation of small arms and light weapons in Nigerian higher institutions of learning.

In recent years cultism seems to be giving way to a new wave of crime popularly called yahoo yahoo. ‘Yahoo Yahoo’, has grown so popular among students in Nigeria’s tertiary institutions of learning to the extent that the average Nigerian undergraduate student is seen as a potential cyber criminal. Asokhia (2010) posited that cybercrime; popularly called “YAHOO” is an off-shoot of advance fee fraud which became popular in the early 90s. Generally, according to Omodunbi, Odiase, Olaniyan, & Esan, (2016), cybercrime may be divided into two categories: the first are crimes targeted at computer networks and devices directly. Such crimes include creating and sharing malicious code, computing viruses, malware etc. The second categories are crimes which are carried out using computer devices or together with networks targeting someone or something which is independent of the computer networks or device. Examples of this category include: Fraud and identity theft, Cyber Stalking, phishing scams and information warfare. More so, Cybercrime has been described by Singh, Gupta & Kumar† (2016) and Okeshola (2013) as comprising acts of unlawful nature in which the computer is either a tool employed in committing the act or the computer becomes a target or both.

The impact of cybercrime and ‘Yahoo Yahooism’ in university communities and other higher institutions of learning as well as the Nigerian society at large cannot be overemphasized. One of such impacts is the drastic reduction in engagement by students on campus in academic activities and greater focus on pursuit for wealth which has affected negatively the number of graduates who can defend their certificates. Again, through peer pressure, most students who do not have strong parental or societal moral upbringing have begun to see cyber criminality as the better option to make a living instead of legal hard work and many have actually derailed from their original life of morality. Further, the unguided display of wealth by the cyber criminals on campus leads to peer pressure on other youths of the university host communities who watch as the cyber criminals display their wealth in various forms around the town. They thus begin to join these gangs and lose focus on their normal life. More so, social life on campus has been greatly influenced by uncontrolled wealth display by the cyber criminals that their fellow students, especially the ladies, see the cyber criminals as the good students for dates and friendship while the legally hard-working students are seen as unserious students that should be left to solitary life. In general, cyber criminality has caused a lot of societal decadence in legal hard work and instead encouraged the strong belief in and desire for quick access to wealth among university students and other students of higher institutions in Nigeria and the youth in the Nigerian society at large. It is therefore necessary that we interrogate the nature and trend of this new form of crime with a view of proffering suggestions that will help to checkmate it in our universities. This is what this paper sets out to do.

Statement of the Problem

The university campuses are generally regarded as hallow grounds for the production and dissemination of knowledge which is for the benefit of the development of the society. Students in tertiary institutions of learning in recent times appear more interested in extravagant life style. They

drive very expensive cars and live in very expensive accommodation outside the university hostels. They live very expensive life styles that are far beyond their parents' capacity in terms of funding. It has been found out that it is with proceeds from cybercrime popularly known as yahoo yahoo/yahoo plus that they fund such style of living. These days they have cartels of students who jointly live together and engage in cybercrime. These cartels have someone who acts like a leader. He decides on who joins the cartel. Students now lobby to become part of the cartel. The study will further be guided by the following research questions: (a) What is the character of cyber criminality/Yahoo Yahooism among university undergraduates? (b) What factors account for the contemporary transitioning from cultism into cyber criminality among university undergraduates in Nigeria? (c) What is the modus operandi of cyber criminality in our universities? (d) What strategies are needed to eradicate the menace in the university system

Objectives of the Study

The objective of the study is bifurcated. The broad objective is to critically examine the security of infiltration of youth cultism in public secondary schools in rural communities of Anambra State with a view to proffering solution to the catastrophic effect it portends for the state and Nigeria at large. Specifically, the study aims to achieve the following objectives; (a) To examine the character of cyber criminality/Yahoo Yahooism among university undergraduates. (b) To critically examine the factors that account for the transitioning from cultism into cyber criminality among university undergraduates in Nigeria. (c) To understand the modus operandi of cyber criminality among university undergraduate in Nigeria. (d) To proffer recommendations to stakeholders on how to identify and halt the spread of the phenomenon in the university system.

2. Literature Review

Conceptualizing Organized Cybercrime and "Yahoo Yahoo" in Nigeria; Cybercrime has become one of the defining **security** challenges of the digital age, transforming traditional criminal activities into technologically enabled offences that transcend geographical boundaries. Unlike conventional crimes that require physical interaction between offenders and victims, cybercrime exploits digital infrastructure, communication technologies and online financial systems to facilitate fraudulent activities across multiple jurisdictions. The Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention) broadly defines cybercrime as criminal offences committed against computer systems or through the use of information and communication technologies. Similarly, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023) conceptualizes cybercrime as unlawful acts in which computer systems function either as the target or as the principal instrument for committing offences. Within the Nigerian context, cybercrime has acquired a distinct socio-cultural identity popularly known as "**Yahoo Yahoo**." The expression originally referred to the use of Yahoo electronic mail accounts by perpetrators of advance-fee fraud during the late 1990s and early 2000s. Over time, however, the concept has evolved beyond advance-fee fraud to encompass a broad range of cyber-enabled financial crimes, including romance scams, identity theft, cryptocurrency fraud, phishing, business email compromise (BEC), investment scams, social media impersonation and ransomware attacks (Omodunbi et al., 2016). Scholars have increasingly argued that "Yahoo Yahoo" should no longer be understood merely as individual internet fraud but rather as an evolving form of organized cyber-enabled criminal enterprise.

Leukfeldt (2014) demonstrates that cybercriminals increasingly operate within structured social networks characterized by specialization, division of labour and international collaboration. Europol's Internet Organized Crime Threat Assessment (IOCTA) similarly concludes that organized cybercrime has become one of the fastest-growing components of global organized criminal markets, generating billions of dollars annually through digitally facilitated fraud. Nigeria has emerged as one of the principal locations associated with cyber-enabled financial fraud in Africa. According to INTERPOL (2024), West Africa—and Nigeria in particular—continues to experience rapid growth in organized online fraud driven by expanding internet penetration, digital financial technologies and weaknesses

in cyber governance. Reports from the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) equally reveal a steady increase in the arrest and prosecution of university students involved in sophisticated cyber fraud schemes. These developments suggest that cybercrime has evolved beyond isolated deviant behaviour into a significant component of organized transnational criminality with important implications for national security, higher education and international financial governance.

Historical Evolution of Campus Cultism in Nigerian Universities; Campus cultism occupies a unique position within the history of Nigerian higher education. Most scholars trace its origin to the establishment of the Pyrates Confraternity in 1952 at the then University College, Ibadan, by Wole Soyinka and six other students. The organization was conceived primarily as an intellectual and social movement designed to challenge colonial elitism, promote social justice and encourage academic excellence (Adejoro, 1995; Nnajiye, 2015). However, the emergence of splinter groups such as the Buccaneers, Black Axe, Vikings, Eiye, Mafia and numerous others fundamentally altered the philosophy of campus confraternities. During the military era, increasing political interference in university governance, declining institutional autonomy, economic hardship and youth unemployment contributed significantly to the militarization of campus cult groups (Rotimi, 2005). By the late 1980s and throughout the 1990s, violent competition for territorial dominance, political patronage and institutional influence transformed many confraternities into highly organized violent groups. Several studies documented widespread involvement of cult groups in armed robbery, kidnapping, sexual violence, intimidation, electoral violence and political thuggery (Okwu, 2006; Ogunbameru, 2004). Importantly, scholars increasingly observe that while violent cult clashes appear to have reduced in frequency within many universities, this does not necessarily imply the disappearance of cult organizations. Rather, many groups have diversified into more economically rewarding criminal activities, particularly cyber-enabled fraud. This organizational adaptation remains underexplored within existing literature and constitutes one of the major gaps addressed by the present study.

From Campus Cultism to Organized Cybercrime: An Emerging Criminal Transition; One of the emerging debates within African criminology concerns whether cybercrime is replacing traditional organized youth criminality or merely transforming it. Existing literature provides only partial explanations. Early Nigerian studies largely treated campus cultism and cybercrime as independent phenomena (Adeniran, 2008; Asokhia, 2010). Consequently, little attention has been devoted to understanding the organizational continuity between the two. Recent evidence, however, suggests a different trajectory. Investigations conducted by the EFCC reveal that many internet fraud syndicates among university students exhibit organizational characteristics similar to those historically associated with campus cult groups. These include centralized leadership, recruitment mechanisms, secrecy, initiation processes, role specialization and internal disciplinary systems. The transition appears to reflect changing criminal opportunity structures rather than the disappearance of organized crime. As digital technologies have become more accessible, cyber-enabled financial fraud offers substantially higher financial rewards with comparatively lower physical risks than violent confraternity activities. Consequently, criminal entrepreneurs increasingly redirect organizational resources from territorial violence toward online financial crime. This finding resonates with Felson and Clarke's opportunity theory, which argues that offenders adapt their methods according to changing opportunities presented by the environment. It equally supports broader organized crime literature suggesting that criminal organizations continually evolve in response to technological innovation and market incentives (UNODC, 2023).

Socio-economic Drivers of Student Cybercriminality; The growing participation of university students in cybercrime has generated substantial scholarly debate regarding its underlying causes. Existing explanations emphasize both structural and individual-level factors. One dominant perspective attributes cybercrime to Nigeria's persistent socio-economic challenges, including youth unemployment, poverty, widening income inequality and declining confidence in legitimate employment opportunities (Smith, 2010). Students increasingly perceive higher education as incapable of guaranteeing economic mobility after graduation, thereby encouraging illegal income-generating

activities. A second perspective emphasizes peer influence and social learning. Tade and Aliyu (2011) argue that internet fraud has increasingly become embedded within youth subcultures where criminal techniques, language, values and identities are transmitted through friendship networks. Within such environments, cybercrime gradually acquires social legitimacy. A third explanation focuses on digital transformation. Increased internet access, social media platforms, cryptocurrency markets, artificial intelligence applications and anonymous communication technologies have substantially lowered the barriers to entry into cyber-enabled crime (UNODC, 2023).

Finally, scholars increasingly point to cultural glorification of sudden wealth. The public celebration of extravagant lifestyles on social media, combined with weak societal sanctions against unexplained wealth, reinforces criminal aspirations among vulnerable youths. The present study argues that these explanations should not be treated independently. Rather, cybercriminality emerges from the interaction of structural inequalities, technological opportunities, peer learning and organizational support provided by existing criminal networks.

Cybercrime, Universities and National Security; Although cybercrime is frequently discussed as an economic offence, recent literature increasingly recognizes its implications for national security. Cyber-enabled financial crimes undermine investor confidence, weaken financial systems, facilitate money laundering and damage the international reputation of affected states (UNODC, 2023). Within universities, cybercrime generates additional security concerns. It contributes to declining academic standards, erosion of institutional values, increased criminal recruitment and weakening of legitimate career aspirations. Moreover, organized cybercriminal groups increasingly exploit universities as recruitment centres because they are concentrated with technologically literate young people with access to digital infrastructure. Evidence from INTERPOL (2024) indicates that organized cybercrime now constitutes one of the principal transnational threats confronting African states. Nigerian cybercriminal networks increasingly collaborate with foreign criminal organizations involved in identity theft, cryptocurrency laundering, and business email compromise. Consequently, university-based cybercrime represents not merely an educational challenge but a growing component of transnational organized crime.

Despite the growing body of scholarship on campus cultism and cybercrime in Nigeria, significant conceptual and empirical gaps remain. First, most existing studies examine campus cultism and cybercrime as separate criminal phenomena, with limited attention to the organizational transition linking both activities. Second, much of the literature emphasizes the causes or prevalence of internet fraud while neglecting the organizational structures through which cybercriminal networks operate within universities. Third, relatively few studies integrate qualitative evidence from students, lecturers and university security personnel across multiple geopolitical zones to examine the changing dynamics of student criminality. Finally, existing studies rarely situate university cybercrime within broader debates on organized transnational crime and national security. This study addresses these gaps by advancing the argument that cybercriminality among Nigerian university undergraduates represents an organizational evolution of campus criminality rather than an entirely new phenomenon. It further demonstrates how university-based cybercrime increasingly interfaces with wider transnational organized criminal networks, thereby extending the analytical scope of previous studies.

3. Methodology

The study combined both survey and documentary methods. The survey instruments adopted in generating primary data for the study was the questionnaire and focused group discussion (FGD). The questionnaire was administered randomly to students in selected universities while the FGD shall comprise of eight to ten participants in every selected school. The respondents included the SUG president, two lecturers, the dean of students' affairs, the Chief Security Officer of the campus, and five students. To select the schools to be sampled, the study stratified the public universities in the country according to the six geo political zones bearing in mind that there is need for good Fifty questionnaires shall be distributed in each selected school. By this, a total of 600 questionnaires shall be distributed. On the other hand, the study employed documentary method to generate secondary data. Data were

collected from Newspaper reports on “Yahoo Yahoo” among students, police reports, National Bureau of Statistics, Ministry of Education, Abuja.

4. Results and Discussion

Campus Cultism as a Gateway to Organized Cybercrime: The study found a strong relationship between campus cultism and the emergence of organized cybercrime among university undergraduates in Nigeria. Contrary to the popular assumption that cybercriminality has completely displaced cultism, the findings indicate that both phenomena have become mutually reinforcing. While conventional cult activities involving violent confrontations, intimidation and territorial rivalry have declined in visibility on many campuses, cult organizations have increasingly repositioned themselves as organizational platforms that facilitate cyber-enabled criminal enterprises. Data generated from the questionnaire and focus group discussions revealed that many cybercriminal groups operating within the universities exhibit organizational characteristics traditionally associated with campus cult groups. These include hierarchical leadership structures, strict codes of secrecy, initiation rituals, loyalty to group leaders, sanctions against defection, and collective protection of members. Respondents, particularly university security personnel and student leaders, indicated that established cult groups now provide operational security for internet fraud syndicates, mediate disputes among members, enforce internal discipline, and occasionally assist in recovering proceeds from fraudulent transactions. This finding corroborates the observations of Leukfeldt (2014), who argues that contemporary cybercrime increasingly operates through organized social networks rather than isolated offenders. It equally aligns with the findings of Europol (2023), which identify cyber-enabled fraud as one of the fastest-growing forms of organized transnational crime characterized by networked criminal structures. Within the Nigerian context, repeated investigations by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) have similarly revealed operational links between suspected internet fraudsters and secret cult organizations across several universities. The implication is that cybercrime within Nigerian universities should not be conceptualized as an entirely new criminal phenomenon but rather as an adaptive transformation of existing organized criminal structures within the higher education system.

Cybercriminality as the Dominant Form of Student Criminality: The study further established that cybercrime has overtaken traditional campus cultism as the most attractive form of organized criminal activity among university undergraduates. The overwhelming majority of respondents identified financial gain rather than ideological commitment, peer protection or campus dominance as the primary motivation for student involvement in organized crime. The survey data indicated that internet fraud is increasingly perceived by many students as a relatively low-risk but highly rewarding economic activity. Unlike cult-related violence, which exposes participants to physical injury, arrest and death, cybercrime offers opportunities for substantial financial rewards with comparatively lower levels of physical risk. Consequently, many students now devote considerable time and resources to developing digital fraud skills instead of engaging in violent cult confrontations.

Focus group discussions further revealed that conspicuous consumption has become a major recruitment mechanism. Respondents consistently identified luxury vehicles, expensive accommodation, designer clothing, high-end electronic gadgets and lavish social lifestyles as powerful incentives attracting new participants into cybercrime networks. Such visible displays of wealth create strong peer pressure, particularly among economically disadvantaged students. These findings support earlier studies by Tade and Aliyu (2011) and Adeniran (2008), both of whom observed that internet fraud among Nigerian youths has increasingly become socially normalized within certain student communities. The findings also resonate with INTERPOL's (2024) African Cyberthreat Assessment Report, which identifies Nigeria as one of the leading centres for organized cyber-enabled financial fraud on the continent. The transition from violent cultism to economically motivated cybercrime therefore reflects changing opportunity structures rather than the disappearance of organized criminality within Nigerian universities.

University Cybercrime as Part of Transnational Organized Crime Networks: One of the most significant findings of the study is that cybercriminality among university undergraduates is deeply embedded within wider national and transnational criminal networks. Although public discourse frequently portrays "Yahoo Yahoo" as an isolated campus activity undertaken by individual students, evidence from this study suggests otherwise. Participants interviewed during the study described complex operational networks involving cryptocurrency traders, identity brokers, document forgers, bank insiders, foreign collaborators and money laundering agents operating outside university campuses. University students often perform only one component of broader criminal value chains whose proceeds are subsequently integrated into larger transnational financial systems. This finding reinforces the position of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2023), which argues that cyber-enabled crimes increasingly transcend national borders through digitally interconnected criminal markets. Likewise, INTERPOL (2024) reports growing collaboration among African cybercriminal groups using encrypted communication platforms, cryptocurrencies and decentralized financial technologies to facilitate international fraud. The findings also correspond with several EFCC investigations that have exposed extensive networks connecting undergraduate internet fraudsters with organized criminal syndicates operating across Nigeria and beyond. These networks engage in identity theft, business email compromise, romance scams, cryptocurrency fraud, money laundering and other forms of cyber-enabled organized crime. The evidence therefore suggests that campus cybercriminality should be viewed as an emerging national security concern with significant transnational dimensions rather than merely a disciplinary problem within Nigerian universities.

Implications of Cybercriminality for the Academic and Social Environment: The study found that cybercriminality has profound consequences for both the academic mission of Nigerian universities and the wider socialization process of undergraduate students. Academically, respondents overwhelmingly agreed that active participation in internet fraud negatively affects students' commitment to learning. Lecturers interviewed during the study reported declining classroom attendance, poor academic engagement, increased absenteeism, reduced interest in research activities and growing examination malpractice among students actively involved in cybercrime. Many respondents observed that financial success obtained through illegal means significantly weakens students' motivation to pursue academic excellence or professional competence. These findings are consistent with previous studies by Ojedokun and Eraye (2012), who reported that internet fraud has altered students' perceptions of education and legitimate career progression. Similarly, Adeniran (2008) observed that participation in cybercrime often leads to declining academic performance and reduced commitment to formal education.

Beyond academics, the study found that cybercriminality has fundamentally altered social values within university communities. Illicit wealth increasingly functions as an important indicator of social status, prestige and attractiveness among students. Focus group participants repeatedly noted that students engaged in cybercrime frequently command greater social influence than academically distinguished students, thereby reinforcing the normalization of criminal success. This finding lends empirical support to Merton's (1938) strain theory, which explains criminal innovation as a response to the gap between culturally valued goals and legitimate opportunities for achieving them. It also validates Sutherland's Differential Association Theory, which argues that criminal behaviour is acquired through sustained interaction with deviant peer groups. Within many university environments, prolonged interaction among cybercriminal networks facilitates the transmission of criminal skills, values and techniques to new recruits. The broader societal implications are equally significant. Respondents expressed concern that the normalization of cybercrime undermines ethical standards among educated youths, damages the international reputation of Nigerian universities, weakens public confidence in university graduates and contributes to Nigeria's persistent image as a source of transnational cyber fraud. The findings therefore suggest that the proliferation of cybercriminality constitutes not merely a campus security challenge but also a serious threat to national development, digital governance, higher education and Nigeria's international standing.

5. Conclusion

Overall, the findings demonstrate that cybercriminality among Nigerian university undergraduates represents an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary shift in organized crime. Traditional campus cultism has not disappeared; instead, it has increasingly adapted to the opportunities presented by digital technologies and global financial networks. Consequently, effective responses require more than punitive law enforcement. They demand integrated interventions involving universities, security agencies, financial institutions, digital service providers, parents and policymakers aimed at addressing both the structural drivers and organizational dynamics of cyber-enabled organized crime.

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