

THE YAHOOISM PHENOMENON IN NIGERIA: TRACING ITS HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT, SOCIAL MEDIA PROPAGATION, AND CONSEQUENCES FOR CULTURE, ECONOMY, AND NIGERIA'S EXTERNAL RELATIONS

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Abstract

The Yahooism phenomenon has grown to become a pervasive threat to Nigeria's economic security, social cohesion, and international relations. This study traces the historical evolution of the term Yahooism in Nigeria, examining its evolution from a mere e-mail service to a traditional advance-fee fraud up to sophisticated online scams. It also investigates the role of social media in propagating cyber fraud, highlighting the ways in which platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter have enabled fraudsters to reach a wider audience and launder their illicit gains. The study further explores the far-reaching consequences of cyber fraud for Nigerian culture, economy, and external relations, including damage to the country's reputation, loss of foreign investment, and strained diplomatic relations. Drawing on a range of sources, including archival research, interviews, and online data, this study offers a nuanced understanding of cyber fraud in Nigeria and its implications for the country's development and global engagement.

Keywords: Yahooism, Phenomenon, Evolution, Consequences, Reputation, Global Engagement

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Introduction

Contrary to public belief, especially in Nigeria, the word 'Yahoo' from which 'Yahooism' was coined, was first introduced into the English lexicon in 1726 by Jonathan Swift in his prose satire, *Gulliver's Travels*, originally titled *Travels into Several Remote Nations of the World*. In the novel, Swift used the word "Yahoos" to talk about brutish, degenerate species that resembled humans and embodied the worst or lowest qualities of humanity such as greed, ignorance, and savagery. 'Yahoo' as a term later applied to any actual human who was particularly unpleasant or unintelligent.

In Nigeria, Yahoo was introduced in the late 1990s, during the rise of new technologies such as the

computer and the internet. It was (and still is) a popular email service - Yahoo.com - and was one of the first used in Nigerian cyberspace to exchange information between individuals, especially tertiary institution students. It became a household name, and it was used to describe the use of the internet and computers in Nigeria as most of the country's citizens were exposed to the online world through this medium. According to Egielewa (2022), Yahoo "is an internet search engine and Yahoo mail was the most popular form of sending electronic messages before the advent of Google mail." As the knowledge of the use of computers and the Internet grew, many young Nigerians - especially young school leavers who were jobless and

undergraduates looking for a means of survival - began to surf the Internet for information on different aspects of life and also share information at their disposal; part of which was falsehood and misleading, deliberate lies aimed at deceiving the target audience (receivers). The Yahoo mail service was the platform for such activities and with time, people found ways to defraud unsuspecting foreigners online, majorly by impersonating important foreign government officials to propose highly questionable economic transactions. These scammers were then tagged as “Yahoo boys” and the term “Yahooism” was used to explain or describe the practice of online fraud.

Over the years, Yahoo/Yahooism has been defined in various ways and by different researchers and scholars. Adejoh et al (2019) defined the phenomenon of “yahoo-yahoo” as “the activities which entail the use of computers, phones, and the Internet to defraud unsuspecting victims, especially those outside the country” and, while citing Lazarus and Okolorie (2019), added, “it originated from the fact that the use of Yahoo emails and Yahoo instant messenger were dominant medium of communication between perpetrators and victims”. Ojedokun and Eraye (2012) briefly describe the concept of yahoo-yahooism as the excessive, extreme, or unreasonable of individuals, mainly Nigerian youths, to get rich through cyber fraud. Egielewa (2022) asserts that “Yahoo-yahooism” and “internet fraud” are synonyms.

In the last two decades, the Nigerian youth population has grown incredibly with an increase in youth unemployment, likewise the population of Internet users. These factors have been alleged to have affected the population of youth involved in Internet fraud or Yahoo in the Nigerian context. This claim is attested to by Ojedokun & Eraye, (2012), Oludayo (2013), and Adejoh et al., (2019); all of whom are cited in Egielewa (2022). According to these scholars, in the last two decades, Nigerian society has witnessed a gradual decline in the value of hard work and the consequence of such decline is the unfortunate rise of cyber fraud/crime, putting Nigeria in the 5th spot of crime perpetrating countries in the world (GOCI, 2022, as cited in Egielewa, 2022).

‘Yahooism’ in the context of this paper is the act of indulging in online fraud and those involved in the act are referred to as Yahoo boys. Ironically, men, women, boys, and girls are part of the unholy deal, therefore broadening the sphere of the popular term, “Yahoo boys”.

Some pundits believe that Yahoo is a replacement for 419, a coinage that was derived from section 419 of the Nigerian Constitution. It is speculated that Nigeria's 419 syndrome started in the early 80s and graduated in the late 90s. The term 419 is a section of the Nigerian Constitution. Which states that “Any person who by

any pretense, and with intent to defraud, obtains from any other person anything capable of being stolen, or induces any other person to deliver to any person anything capable of being stolen, is guilty of a felony, and is liable to imprisonment for three years.” The Nigerian Constitution.

Yahooism and Social Media Influence

Nwokoro et al (2022), citing Ezea (2017), state that Nigerian society has witnessed a tremendous and rapid change through social media where there are large portions of the platforms and their features that not only corrupt the country's value system but also poses as a huge threat to financial and privacy security of people within and outside the country. Several studies have shown that Social media platforms have a potential influence on users which also provide several opportunities for users. Social media platforms are ultimately utilized by teenagers and youths in Nigeria for sharing political activities and updates, educational information, environmental concerns, discoveries, culture, language and communication patterns, values, norms, thoughts, feelings, music, videos, nude pictures, crafts, exhibitions of talents, and other activities (Ngonso, et.al, 2024; Ngonso & Egielewa, 2023a; Ngonso & Egielewa, 2023b; Ngonso & Chukwu, 2022; Ngonso, 2019a; Ngonso, 2019b; Ngonso, et.al, 2020; Ngonso&Egielewa, 2018)

Button and Cross (2017) as cited in Nwokoro et al (2022) are of the view that “the social maladies aggravated by the popularity of social media have frustrated the institutionalization of both communal living, sense of decency and proper conduct on one hand, and on the other, causes a disorganized, and grossly fractured family values”.

Although social media cannot be said to be completely negative as it proves to be useful in mass communication and for community building and development, one needs to understand that these platforms ease the communication processes for fraudsters, “Yahoo-boys” as we know them, and enables them to reach their victims easier and faster. Cornish et al (2010) attest to this by stating that with minimum effort, social media makes it so much easier for fraudsters to craft messages that look real and credible, thereby making it hard for people to tell the difference between what is real and what is made up (fiction).

With most early fraudsters using mail service and fax machines, Nwokoro et al (2022) share that social media has changed the tides and its technological innovations have “popularized youths in the business of defrauding unsuspected foreigners and Nigerians today”. Aside from this, social media has given these fraudsters the platforms to be game players in the “waters of financial fraud and

cybercrime” and has also provided them the opportunity to flaunt their flamboyant lifestyles that are funded by the money they earn from these crimes.

The “easiness” of communication across these platforms between perpetrators and victims, the anonymity feature of social media, and the room for flaunting of the cybercrime lifestyles are just some of the ways social media has influenced the Yahoo business in Nigeria. It has also brought about heightened peer pressure, forcing average Nigerians to go into the business to be as “jaded” or as rich as their friends or “role models” that they see online. What this does is to then further distort Nigerian values, affect the country's national image, and fan the flames of the desire of youths and other Nigerians to make fast money.

Cultural Implications of Yahooism in Nigeria

Although there are existing literature works that hold the opinion that the concept of “yahoo-yahoo” is foreign or “alien” to the African culture, one has to recall that as far back as one can think of, historical Nigerians made use of charms and sacrifices to achieve favors and yield positive results, especially in the business sector. Therefore, the stance that “Yahooism” or cyber fraud is alien to the African culture, especially in Nigeria, can be contested as what we know as Yahooism today not only covers cyberspace but also has elements of “juju”, charms, and “jazz”; therefore making it a modernized version of the acts carried out by our ancestors decades and centuries ago.

However, when focusing on the Nigerian society of today, the business of cyber fraud or yahooism has brought about certain implications in the cultural aspect of Nigerian society. Lawani and Osagie-Obaze (2019) as cited in Salifu (2023) explored how Yahoo-plus (the brand of Yahooism laced with spiritualism) has affected the security of Nigerians and how there is the heightened need for counseling for safety and security.

Aside from the issue of security and the rise of spiritualist practices, there is the implication of moral decay. The cultural values of Nigeria, with emphasis on integrity, honesty, and hard work, are pushed aside in the business of Yahoo. This, according to Salifu (2023), then leads to a situation where the opposite values such as dishonesty, corruption, and laziness, are bred instead; therefore leading to decadence in the moral structure of the country. This decline or decay creates a laxity in the Nigerian moral system that is used by the fraudsters to continue with their acts, driven by the need to make quick money at the expense of the society's moral compass. The Yahoo business also breeds greed and Akinnaso (2018) explains that this breeds about a situation where individuals in the

country behave as though they “have sold their soul to the devil”.

Other cultural implications of Yahooism on Nigerian society, according to Salifu (2023), include stigmatization of the perpetrators, spiritual repercussions as seen in cases where those involved in “juju” meet one issue or the other due to failed charms or ineffectiveness of the gotten charms, peer pressure and bad influence, and the continuous decay of the Nigerian society in terms of morality and values. According to Amah and Egemba (2022,p.1), "culture has always been a central component of relationships, from the reciprocal exchange of gifts and goodwill by ancient rulers to modern-day. It influences how people within a country interact with each other, it guides decision-making, values, thinking patterns, and behaviour".

Nwobodo (2024), in the discourse of the impacts of yahoo-yahoo on the victims and society, lists the cultural implications of this phenomenon to include mental health consequences which affect the effectiveness of the society force, and the damage to National Image which fosters “negative stereotypes of Nigerians as inherently corrupt and deceitful”; which will not only affect Nigerian traveling abroad but also “deters foreign investors from engaging with the country due to concerns over fraud and deception”.

Economic Implications of Yahooism in Nigeria

Beyond its implications in the cultural sector, Yahooism has its effects on the economy of Nigeria; more to its detriment than to its good. According to Nwobodo (2024), some of the economic implications of Yahooism in Nigeria include; 1) financial and property loss on the part of the victims who face impoverishment and liquidation due to the losses they incur at the hands of the perpetrators, making them resort to borrowing and mortgaging of assets which often results in bankruptcy and mounting debts, and; 2) pressure on market prices due to the extravagant lifestyle being flaunted by the yahoo boys and girls, thereby raising the cost of living for the Nigerian populace and impacting the broader economy.

Aside from the economic implications listed by Nwobodo (2024), other implications of Yahooism on Nigeria's economy include; 1) economic losses, as seen in 2023 where Nigeria lost \$706 million to cybercrime (ENACT Africa, 2024); 2) incurred costs to businesses who have to tighten up their cyber security to be as safe as possible from these fraudsters, sometimes stretching their annual budgets thin (Kolawole, 2020), and; 3) incurred costs to law enforcement organizations and bodies who have to spend time and resources in combating the business for national and international security, safety, and also for the sake of the country's reputation (Kolawole, 2020). Nsidibe,

Emaimo, and Amah (2017) attributed underdevelopment to youth restiveness which may also be responsible for Yahooism in Nigeria.

Implications of Yahooism on Nigeria's External Relations

As a phenomenon that is now widely practiced in Nigeria, Yahooism, has great implications for Nigeria's image abroad. Cyber fraud perpetrated by Nigerians can tarnish the country's image and reputation, making it harder for legitimate Nigerian businesses to operate internationally. Also, the perception of Nigeria as a hub for cybercrime otherwise known as Yahooism can lead to a decline in foreign direct investment (FDI) in the country. A study by the World Bank (2019) found that countries with high levels of corruption and crime, such as cybercrime, tend to attract less FDI. The economic implications of Yahooism on Nigeria's external relations are indeed enormous. According to the Nigerian Bureau of Statistics (2020), the country lost an estimated ₦128 billion (approximately \$330 million USD) to cybercrime in 2020 alone. This loss can have a negative impact on Nigeria's economy, making it harder for the country to attract foreign investment (Adeyemi, 2019).

The perpetuation of Yahooism by Nigerians can strain diplomatic relations between Nigeria and other countries, particularly those that have been targeted by Nigerian cybercriminals (Eboh, 2018). For example, in 2019, the United States Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) indicted 80 individuals, mostly Nigerians, for their involvement in a massive cybercrime scheme (FBI, 2019). This incident led to a diplomatic row between Nigeria and the United States, with the Nigerian government denying any involvement in the scheme. The stigma and stereotyping associated with Yahooism can make it harder for Nigerians living abroad to integrate into their host communities (Igbino, 2017). Furthermore, the negative reputation of Nigeria due to Yahooism can contribute to a brain drain, as talented Nigerians may choose to emigrate to countries with a more positive reputation (Adeyemi, 2019).

The security implications of Yahooism on Nigeria's external relations are also significant. The perpetuation of cybercrime by Nigerians can compromise national security by exposing sensitive information and undermining the country's ability to protect its critical infrastructure (NISER, 2019). Furthermore, Nigeria's reputation as a hub for Yahooism can make it a target for retaliatory cyberattacks from other countries (Eboh, 2018).

On the whole, the implications of Yahooism on Nigeria's external relations are far-reaching and multifaceted. The perpetuation of cybercrime has damaged Nigeria's reputation, led to a decline in foreign investment, strained diplomatic relations with

other countries, and compromised national security.

To address these challenges, the Nigerian government must take decisive action to combat Yahooism and protect the country's critical infrastructure. This can be achieved through the establishment of effective cybersecurity frameworks, the prosecution of cybercriminals, and the promotion of international cooperation to combat cybercrime.

Data Collection and Summary of Nigerians' Opinion on Yahooism from Quora

Ifeanyi Maduka, a Former Senior Network Engineer at Airtel Nigeria between 2015 and 2017, shares the view that Yahoo boys are some boys who take advantage of technology to fish for opportunities that are lacking back home. To him, most of them are trying to repatriate some of the funds looted from Nigeria and Africa by the Western world through the Slave trade and colonialism. Apart from the people they destroy emotionally, he is against the greedy ones who want to get some huge profit off the African continent and deserve what they get. This is 2018, and with the awareness of scams out there, if you still get scammed, you have yourself to blame. Learn how to be information security conscious. Yahoo boys are just opportunists looking for available prey, don't be left unaware. Just like the drug business, they will be around for a long time to come.

Isaac Ayodeji Ikusika-Intern Software Development:

Yahoo boy is a term used to refer to internet fraudsters. In the early 2000s, Yahoo Messenger was used to chat up 'clients' they take from dating sites hence the term "Yahoo". These days, most of the youths are into this act because they can access everything on their mobile phones now. They no longer use Yahoo Messenger but any chatting app available. They take clients from dating sites and social media especially Facebook these days and scam them of money, property, and emotions. The most concerning thing about this is that it has become a norm. Musicians hail these guys for their lavish spending, hype men focus on them in clubs, girls flood around them and they are proud to tell people what they do unlike in those days. There are lots of materials on the internet that enhance these scams. VPN, Photoshop, poetry, pictures, name it, and lonely white people mostly in the USA fall for these scams and scammers who claim to be soldiers deployed to Africa or some other formats.

Abimaje Abdul: You simply tell them he's an internet fraudster. People who scheme you out of your earnings by pretending to either possess some good you need to have some 'huge fortune' they need your help to retrieve or are whatever deal sounds too good to be true.

Drick Wealth: The term Yahoo boy in Nigeria stands for a fraudster, con artist, 419, GBoys, and so on. The history goes back a long history. The history of Yahoo is very long as regards to Nigeria but I will just summarize everything. 419 started in Nigeria in the early 80s to late 90s, 419 is a section of Nigeria Constitution. Which states that “Any person who by any pretense, and with intent to defraud, obtains from any other person anything capable of being stolen, or induces any other person to deliver to any person anything capable of being stolen, is guilty of a felony, and is liable to imprisonment for three years.” This set of con artists defraud their fellow countrymen. With the introduction of mobile phones in Nigeria this same set of people upped their game by calling different random numbers to inform them that they have won a lottery and before what they won will be handed over to them they have to pay a certain amount of money. Once their fellow countrymen pays, that is the end. No lottery was won.

Daniel Damilola Obiokeke: Yahoo boys refer to a ring of individually operating cyber fraudsters in Nigeria. Just say it's how the Nigerians refer to online scammers (that sums it up well). The name originated because they ran their operations via chat rooms and frameworks of the once common Yahoo Mail. So they called them by mail provider. Now they usually use the tools provided by Gmail and its sister service Hangout. So, they call them G boys. Their activities have still grown off what it was when they were called Yahoo boys in their real sense, they now put on false social media accounts in different spaces with different methods of scamming called formats; which they share amongst themselves in some brotherly kind of way—oh yes, they have some social line around themselves where they meet like board directors from their several operations to the club, womanize and show off their newly acquired crumbs of wealth. There is a thing around that they use diabolical means to operate too.

Ebele Nweje reacted to the question, what are the reasons behind the huge growth of Yahoo boys in Nigeria, and how this problem can be solved? On Quora, he averted thus

1. **The materialism of the highest order.** In Nigeria. You are somebody when you are rich, famous, and successful. The end always justifies the means, just be rich please, and acquire the wealth, the how is irrelevant. People will worship and acknowledge you when you are financially buoyant. Woe besides you when you are unable to measure up with your mates when you cannot provide when demands are made. You have no say, no one spares you much

respect or thought. Thus, each of us hustles to be accepted, to belong, and to earn some respect and power by acquiring more wealth. Yahoo provides an easy means to achieve this and get rich.

2. **High rate of unemployment.** I recently overheard over the radio that the Nigerian Labour Congress was lamenting that the unemployment data provided by NBS or so is a threat to Nigeria. I was amazed that they waited for that data to realize that the level of unemployment in Nigeria is a volcano waiting to erupt if not checked. In order to make ends meet, youths are involved in all kinds of shady businesses, including Yahoo since there are no jobs.
3. **Selfish and corrupt leaders.** These groups of individuals make life difficult for the masses. The National cake becomes personal and individual cake while the masses go hungry. Funds that could be used to establish industries provide infrastructures and enable development are being diverted to private pocket.

Rebeca Reiley: Nigerian scammers are Nigerians who work with other country scammers around the world. They use pictures of oil rig workers, doctors in other countries, UN workers, and military personnel to hook a woman/ man by talking about how they love that person. They try to get all the information they can out of them. Once they have them they start using sad stories about a sick relative or they need to get home they convince you that they love you and you are their whole world. Then they ask you to send them money and Steam and Apple cards. They start with 100\$ then they convince you they need more only this time it is for 300-400-500\$. They promise you will not have to pay anymore if you will just help them. They will always love you and when they get here they will marry you and you will be their Queen. They will always deny they are scamming you. When you don't have any more money they drop you and move on to the next pigeon. Babe, I love you, I can't live without you, you're my Queen, (King) words like this you're dealing with a scammer. BLOCK AND DELETE THEM.

Conclusion

Yahooism in Nigeria started in the 80s but became a more prominent endeavor with the coming of the Internet, popularly known as Cyber fraud. It has grown to become a major challenge for Nigeria, with significant implications for the country's culture, economy, and external relations. At home, Yahooism has rendered the victims poor while creating easy wealth for the Yahoo boys. It greatly encourages

laziness and cybercrime while rendering Nigeria a crime-prone country before other nations of the world. This study has traced the historical development of cyber fraud in Nigeria, examined the role of social media in its propagation, and explored its far-reaching consequences.

The findings of this study highlight the need for a comprehensive and multi-faceted approach to addressing cyber fraud in Nigeria. This includes strengthening the country's legal and regulatory frameworks, improving cybersecurity infrastructure, and enhancing international cooperation to combat cybercrime.

Furthermore, there is a need for increased awareness and education among Nigerians about the dangers of cyber fraud and the importance of online security. This can be achieved through public awareness campaigns, school programs, and community outreach initiatives. Ultimately, mitigating the impact of Yahooism in Nigeria requires a collective effort from government, civil society, and individuals. By working together, Nigeria can reduce the incidence of cyber fraud, protect its citizens and businesses, and promote a safer and more secure online environment.

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