

Silent Codes: Exploring Cybercrime Syndicates and the Emergence of Digital Gang Cultures among Youths in Ughelli North LGA, Delta State, Nigeria

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Abstract: This study explored the relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities in Ughelli North LGA, Delta State, Nigeria, using the Social Learning Theory as a framework. A quantitative research design was adopted, with a sample size of 235 youths selected using a stratified random sampling technique. Data was collected through structured questionnaires, and the Chi-Square test and regression were applied for data analysis. The findings reveal a significant relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities, with well-organized syndicates showing higher levels of youth involvement. The study recommends that law enforcement agencies focus on disrupting the organizational frameworks of cybercrime syndicates and advocate for community-based interventions to offer youths alternatives to digital gang activities. By addressing both the structural and social factors, it is possible to reduce youth involvement in cybercrime in the region.

Keywords: *Cybercrime, Digital Gang Activities, Social Learning Theory, Youth Participation, Structural Organization, and Ughelli North LGA, Nigeria.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Nigeria has witnessed a dramatic transformation in the nature of criminal activities, especially with the surge in cybercrime among young people. This new wave of criminality, often glamorized on social media, is reshaping the traditional understanding of youth deviance. In places like Ughelli North Local Government Area of Delta State, the digital space has become a platform where new forms of gang affiliations—centred around cyber-fraud—are emerging and thriving. These digital gangs, commonly referred to as "Yahoo boys," operate within intricate networks that mimic traditional cult-like structures but function almost entirely online (Okoro, 2022).

The proliferation of smartphones, access to encrypted messaging apps, and anonymity in the virtual world has emboldened these cyber syndicates. While traditional cultism in Nigeria involved initiation rites, territorial control, and physical violence, the digital variants are driven by hierarchy, coded language, and online rituals, such as flaunting

fraudulently acquired wealth (Eze & Chukwuma, 2023). In Ughelli North, a region previously known for its agricultural productivity, there is growing concern over how cybercrime has become both a symbol of prestige and a pathway to financial freedom for unemployed youths (Johnson, 2024). These developments are not only altering local youth cultures but also straining community policing and intelligence efforts.

The socio-economic challenges that drive young people into cybercrime are deeply rooted in high youth unemployment, poverty, and a failing education system. In many cases, communities appear to silently tolerate or even celebrate these individuals as local celebrities who bring money into impoverished households (Adewale & Uche, 2021). This dynamic is particularly evident in areas like Ughelli North, where visible symbols of cybercrime success—such as luxury cars, flamboyant lifestyles, and social media displays—serve to normalize criminality. These symbols also attract younger teenagers who aspire to be like the "Yahoo lords," thereby perpetuating the cycle.

Despite increasing crackdowns by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) and other law enforcement agencies, the adaptability of these digital gangs keeps them steps ahead of policing efforts (EFCC, 2023). With the use of VPNs, crypto-wallets, and anonymous web services, many of these syndicates remain elusive. This is compounded by the inability of existing legal and institutional frameworks to fully comprehend or dismantle the complex web of cyber-gang operations. Furthermore, schools and religious institutions in Ughelli North appear ill-equipped to counter the glamorization of cybercrime in peer and online communities (Musa, 2020).

The challenge is that cybercrime in Ughelli North is no longer an isolated act of deviance but has evolved into a deeply structured gang culture with unique codes, rituals, and recruitment methods. The normalization of this lifestyle is a critical security threat, not just economically but also socially, as it corrupts value systems and undermines national development. Unfortunately, there is limited scholarly research that explores the evolution of these cyber-gang cultures from a criminological and sociocultural lens within semi-urban communities in Delta State (Ishaya, 2025). The lack of localized studies leaves law enforcement, educators, and policymakers with inadequate insights to develop targeted interventions.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore the dynamics of cybercrime syndicates and the emergence of digital gang cultures among youths in Ughelli North LGA, Delta State. By focusing on the period between 2020 and 2025, the study will investigate the structural organization, motivations, recruitment patterns, and societal impacts of these cyber gangs. The findings will contribute to contemporary criminological discourse and provide actionable recommendations for youth intervention programs, community-based policing, and cybercrime prevention policies in Nigeria.

➤ *Objective of the Study*

The general objective of the study is to examine silent codes: exploring cybercrime syndicates and the emergence of digital gang cultures among youths in Ughelli North LGA, Delta State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study intends to:

- Examine the structural organization and recruitment patterns of cybercrime syndicates among youths in Ughelli North LGA, Delta State.
- Investigate the influence of peer pressure and social media on the participation of youths in digital gang cultures within the study area.

➤ *Research Hypotheses*

- H₀₁ There is no significant relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities in Ughelli North LGA.

- H₀₂ Peer pressure and social media exposure do not significantly influence youth involvement in cybercrime and digital gang culture in Ughelli North LGA.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

➤ *Conceptual Clarifications: Cybercrime*

Cybercrime, also referred to as computer crime or digital crime, has evolved in complexity and scale due to advancements in technology and the global spread of internet usage. Scholars often define cybercrime as criminal activities that are facilitated through the use of computers or digital networks. According to Adebayo and Olayinka (2020), cybercrime refers to “any criminal act committed through the internet or against a computer system or data, with the intention to defraud, causes harm, or gain unauthorized access.” This definition emphasizes both the tools used and the intent behind cyber-offenses, ranging from identity theft to financial fraud.

From a criminological standpoint, cybercrime is increasingly understood not only as a technical offense but also as a socio-cultural phenomenon. Okafor and Ibrahim (2021) argue that cybercrime in developing nations like Nigeria should be interpreted in the context of social exclusion, youth unemployment, and the pursuit of digital prestige. Thus, cybercrime is not merely about illegal access or data theft; it also includes the symbolic and performative aspects of online scams, such as “Yahoo Yahoo” practices, which have gained notoriety among Nigerian youths.

More recent scholarship has expanded the definition to include emerging threats such as cryptojacking, sextortion, cyber bullying, and deepfake-based fraud. Ezenwa and Chukwuemeka (2022) describe cybercrime as “the illegal use of internet-enabled technologies to exploit vulnerabilities in individuals, institutions, or infrastructure for personal or group gain.” Their approach highlights the growing sophistication of cybercriminals and the need for dynamic legal and policy responses. In particular, their study reveals how cybercrime has adapted to social media platforms and encrypted messaging services as safe havens for illicit activities.

Uche and Bassey (2024) further classify cybercrime into three broad categories: crimes against individuals (such as phishing, online harassment), crimes against property (e.g., data theft, financial fraud), and crimes against the state (such as cyberterrorism and electoral manipulation). These classifications offer a framework for understanding the multi-layered nature of cybercrime and underscore the importance of digital literacy and law enforcement capacity in Nigeria’s fight against the digital underworld.

➤ *Overview of Cybercrime Syndicates*

Cybercrime syndicates represent a more structured and organized form of cybercriminal activity, often operating as sophisticated criminal enterprises rather than isolated individual actors. These groups rely on a hierarchy of roles such as developers, phishers, money mules, and launderers to execute complex cyber operations (Okpara & Bello, 2021). Unlike lone hackers, syndicates employ coordinated strategies, distribute tasks among members, and exploit both technical and human vulnerabilities to perpetrate large-scale fraud. Their operations can span multiple countries, making them difficult to trace and prosecute under national legal systems (Udeh & Sanni, 2020).

In the Nigerian context, cybercrime syndicates have evolved in response to economic hardships, weak law enforcement, and the rapid spread of digital technologies. According to Yusuf and Eweka (2022), many of these groups emerge from informal networks such as peer cliques in universities or urban neighborhoods. Over time, these loosely affiliated groups transform into organized syndicates with defined leadership structures, recruitment processes, and revenue-sharing formulas. In some regions, these groups have ties with traditional cult groups or organized gangs, creating hybrid criminal enterprises that operate both online and offline.

Moreover, cybercrime syndicates in Nigeria increasingly rely on encrypted messaging platforms, fake identities, and digital money transfer systems such as cryptocurrency to evade detection. As noted by Akinyemi and Oduwole (2023), these syndicates employ advanced social engineering techniques, romance scams, business email compromise (BEC), and ATM skimming as part of their criminal toolkit. Their success is often fueled by local and transnational collaboration, sometimes involving diasporic networks that facilitate laundering and logistics.

Despite the growing body of literature on cybercrime, scholars such as Nwogu and Ibrahim (2025) argue that the operations of these syndicates are still under-researched, especially at the grassroots level. Most studies focus on national trends or high-profile arrests, while little attention is paid to how cybercrime syndicates embed themselves in communities, recruit members, and sustain operations under the radar. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective prevention and disruption strategies tailored to local realities.

➤ *Overview of Digital Gang Culture*

Digital gang culture is an emerging concept in criminology that explores how traditional gang behaviors—such as group affiliation, identity performance, and territorial control—have been adapted to the digital environment. According to Olumide and Bakare (2021), digital gangs are organized groups of individuals who use online platforms to

facilitate criminal activity, reinforce group loyalty, and project power. These gangs may not have a physical presence, yet they possess symbols, hierarchies, and codes of conduct similar to street-based gangs. The digital shift has allowed such groups to evade traditional forms of surveillance and expand their influence across borders with ease.

In the Nigerian context, digital gang culture is often associated with youth involvement in cyber-fraud operations such as *Yahoo Yahoo* and *Yahoo Plus*. These groups are not only defined by their engagement in cybercrime but also by their shared identities, communication codes, and rituals, often reinforced through platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, and Telegram (Okon & Musa, 2022). As Ajibade and Nwankwo (2023) note, these digital formations are driven by a desire for status, wealth, and peer recognition, where online criminal success is celebrated and mimicked. The glamorization of cybercrime lifestyles through music, fashion, and social media further legitimizes these groups in the eyes of vulnerable or economically excluded youths.

Furthermore, digital gang culture has contributed to a reconfiguration of criminal networks in semi-urban and peri-urban communities. Edeh (2024) observes that in places like Ughelli, Benin, and Aba, digital gangs operate in cells, where younger recruits are mentored by more experienced cybercriminals, blurring the lines between mentorship, gang membership, and entrepreneurship. These gangs employ encrypted communications, fake identities, and even black magic rituals (in the case of *Yahoo Plus*) to enhance their operations and evade detection. This complex interplay of digital skill, cultural beliefs, and socio-economic desperation gives rise to a form of "techno-spiritual gang culture" unique to certain Nigerian regions.

Despite growing academic interest, there is still a dearth of localized, empirical studies that investigate how digital gangs function within specific communities. Most existing literature remains broad, offering national or regional overviews without unpacking the specific structural and socio-psychological dynamics of these groups. As Nwachukwu and Ibrahim (2025) argue, there is an urgent need for community-based studies that examine recruitment methods, socialization processes, and the long-term implications of digital gang involvement for youth identity and national security.

➤ *Structural Organization and Recruitment Patterns of Cybercrime Syndicates among Youths in Ughelli North LGA*

The structural organization of cybercrime syndicates in Nigeria, particularly in regions like Ughelli North LGA, reflects a shift from loosely coordinated peer groups to more hierarchical and professionalized criminal networks. According to Uche and Abiola (2021), these syndicates often mirror the structure of traditional cult groups, with distinct roles such as "pickers" (those who collect illicit funds),

“connects” (intermediaries with foreign partners), and “techs” (those with technical hacking skills). In Ughelli North, these structures are reinforced by community-level secrecy codes, localized initiation rites, and digital communication protocols that create a strong sense of internal cohesion and operational discipline.

Recruitment into these cybercrime groups frequently targets young males, particularly those who are economically vulnerable, unemployed, or socially marginalized. Owhofasa and Okiemute (2022) highlight that older, more experienced cybercriminals serve as recruiters or “mentors,” offering promises of wealth, status, and protection. In Ughelli North, peer influence and social pressure are major drivers, with many youths joining syndicates not just for financial gain but also to gain a sense of belonging and masculine identity. These networks often begin in local cyber cafés, tertiary institutions, or informal youth hangouts, where new members are socialized into the digital criminal culture.

Moreover, the recruitment process is often formalized through symbolic rituals and loyalty testing. These initiation processes may include small-scale fraud trials, oaths of secrecy, or, in more extreme cases, rituals associated with *Yahoo Plus*—a version of cyber-fraud that involves ritual practices believed to guarantee success (Akpobari & Enakirerhi, 2023). These rites create both psychological bonds and fear-based loyalty, ensuring that recruits remain committed and compliant. The structural fluidity of these groups—able to expand or reconfigure rapidly—makes them resilient in the face of law enforcement crackdowns, particularly in rural-urban border areas like Ughelli North.

Despite increasing reports of cybercrime in Delta State, few empirical studies have focused specifically on the organizational structures and grassroots recruitment patterns in areas like Ughelli North. As noted by Eregare and Ogbodo (2025), much of the existing research provides national overviews without capturing local nuances. This gap hinders the development of targeted intervention strategies. Understanding how these syndicates embed themselves within community life and adapt to local socio-economic dynamics is essential for crafting effective prevention programs that resonate with the lived experiences of at-risk youths.

➤ *Peer Pressure and Social Media on Youth Participation in Digital Gang Cultures*

The growing involvement of Nigerian youths in digital gang cultures has been significantly influenced by peer pressure, especially in semi-urban and economically challenged regions like Ughelli North LGA. Scholars have consistently linked the rise of cybercrime among youths to peer-driven motivations for wealth, prestige, and acceptance. According to Okon and Musa (2021), peer influence often acts as a gateway to digital criminal subcultures, where young people are encouraged to join cyber gangs to avoid social

exclusion. In tight-knit communities, where digital success is publicly celebrated, resisting the pull of such peer circles becomes increasingly difficult, particularly for school dropouts and unemployed youths.

Social media platforms such as Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok, and Facebook also play a crucial role in shaping digital gang culture by glamorizing the lifestyles associated with cybercrime. Eze and Olufemi (2022) observe that youths in regions like Delta State are constantly exposed to curated online content that portrays cyber-fraudsters—commonly referred to as *Yahoo Boys*—as successful and powerful figures. This virtual display of wealth, exotic fashion, and luxury goods creates aspirational models that normalize criminality. Social media not only facilitates admiration but also serves as a recruitment tool, with potential initiates engaging in online conversations, memes, and encrypted chat groups that promote the gang's ideology.

Peer pressure and social media exposure also intersect with a broader crisis of identity and aspiration among Nigerian youths. In a society where access to legitimate employment is limited, young people often turn to the internet to redefine their self-worth and societal relevance. As highlighted by Igbo and Omodara (2023), many youths feel compelled to join digital gangs not merely for economic gain, but to assert social dominance, fulfill peer expectations, and challenge conventional paths to success. Within Ughelli North, these cultural dynamics are reinforced by local narratives that view cybercrime as a smart, bold, and even heroic act of resistance against systemic inequality.

Despite this growing trend, localized studies on the psychological and sociocultural factors that fuel youth engagement in digital gang culture remain sparse. As Urowayino and Ejiroghene (2025) argue, current anti-cybercrime interventions fail because they overlook the peer networks and media environments that shape youth behavior at the community level. A nuanced understanding of how peer pressure and social media intersect in driving digital criminality is essential for formulating holistic preventive strategies. Such approaches must consider not only punitive measures but also youth-centered education and digital literacy programs tailored to vulnerable communities like Ughelli North LGA.

➤ *Empirical Studies*

Adesina and Thompson (2020) examined Youth Subcultures and Digital Deviance in Nigeria's Urban Periphery. This qualitative exploratory study investigated how informal youth groups transition into organized cybercrime cells. The population consisted of youths aged 16–28 in Warri, Delta State. A sample of 20 was selected through snowball sampling. Using in-depth interviews and social mapping techniques, data was analyzed via grounded theory. The study found that these cyber groups were modeled after street cults,

with members holding ranks and roles such as “the loader,” “the picker,” and “the handler.” The researchers recommended community-based rehabilitation centers and peer-led digital education campaigns.

Afolabi and Ihejirika (2021) examined Digital Tribalism and Criminal Innovation: A Study of Youth Internet Gangs in Nigeria. Adopting a case study design, this research explored how online communities foster the emergence of cyber gangs. The population included 500 internet-active youths in three South-West states. A sample of 100 was selected through quota sampling. Online surveys and virtual ethnography were used. Data analysis was conducted using NVivo. The study revealed that encrypted online spaces such as Telegram and Discord are used to maintain cyber gang loyalty and coordination. The authors recommended increased regulation of encrypted messaging platforms and online youth engagement through positive digital spaces.

Obi and Garba (2024) investigated Peer Bonding, Social Hierarchies, and Digital Crime: A Psychosocial Investigation. This mixed-method study examined the psychological factors that influence youth engagement in digital fraud. The population comprised university students in Southern Nigeria. A sample of 250 was selected using stratified random sampling. Instruments included structured questionnaires and focus group discussions. Analysis involved SPSS (factor analysis) and thematic coding. The findings showed that peer loyalty and fear of exclusion were stronger motivators than economic need. Recommendations included mental health interventions and peer-to-peer anti-cybercrime advocacy.

Danjuma and Mfon (2022) investigated Cyber-Fraternities and Digital Street Codes Among Youths in Nigeria. Using a descriptive ethnographic design, this study focused on how digital street codes mimic traditional cult languages and rules. The population was youth cyber actors in Benin City. A sample of 18 was selected through chain referral sampling. The research used participant observation and semi-structured interviews, analyzed through discourse analysis. The study revealed that syndicates use coded slang, digital handshakes (emojis), and pseudonyms to recruit and operate. It recommended linguistic-based intelligence gathering and street-level countercultures promoting ethical digital practices.

Umeh and Odogwu (2023) examined The Influence of Instagram Influencers on the Normalization of Cybercrime Among Nigerian Youths. This quantitative survey research examined the role of social media influencers in encouraging youth cybercrime. The population included 600 youths across five Nigerian universities. A sample of 300 was selected via multistage sampling. Structured questionnaires were analyzed using regression analysis in SPSS. Results indicated that exposure to influencers who flaunt luxury linked to online fraud significantly increased intention to engage in

cybercrime. The study recommended monitoring influencer content and integrating ethics into digital marketing education.

Ayeni and Ebong (2024) examined Organized Fraud and Youth Networks in Nigeria's Online Economy. This qualitative phenomenological study focused on the organizational patterns of internet fraud rings in Port Harcourt and Ughelli. The population included ex-cyber gang members and cybercrime investigators. A sample of 22 was selected through expert and snowball sampling. Narrative interviews were analyzed thematically. The study found that gangs operate under a “franchise model,” with senior members recruiting and training younger ones in exchange for a cut of earnings. The authors recommended training law enforcement in online economic network tracing.

Babatunde and Osei (2025) in their research assessed the Socioeconomic Triggers of Digital Gang Affiliation Among African Youths: A Comparative Study. This comparative research design investigated digital gang culture in Nigeria and Ghana. The population was internet-using youth aged 15–35. A sample of 400 was selected using cluster sampling. Tools included questionnaires and expert interviews, analyzed through multivariate regression and comparative thematic analysis. Findings indicated poverty, unemployment, and peer validation as common factors influencing digital gang membership. It recommended international collaboration on youth-targeted social enterprise programs.

Ndukwe and Enyinnaya (2023) examined Recruitment Trends in Online Fraud Networks in South-East Nigeria. Using a cross-sectional design, this study explored how syndicates recruit members through tertiary institutions and online forums. The population included students in Anambra and Enugu States. A sample of 150 was drawn using purposive sampling. Questionnaires and expert interviews were used. Data was analyzed using frequency distribution and ANOVA. Results showed that most recruits were contacted via encrypted chats or by older students posing as “mentors.” The study recommended monitoring cybercafés and campus tech hubs while offering alternative digital skill-building programs.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The best theoretical framework that can explain the behavior of youths involved in cybercrime and digital gang cultures is Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977). This theory focuses on how individuals learn behaviors through interactions with their environment, particularly through observation and imitation. Below is a detailed explanation of the theory's applicability to your study.

Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory (1977) posits that people learn from one another via observation, imitation, and modeling. The theory emphasizes that behavior is learned

through environmental influences, especially through social interaction. Bandura's major argument is that individuals are not merely passive recipients of external stimuli but actively engage with their environment, often adopting behaviors they observe in others. Central to this theory is the concept of vicarious reinforcement, where individuals modify their behavior based on the observed consequences of others' actions. This theory is particularly relevant to understanding youth involvement in criminal activities, including cybercrime, as it highlights how youths in social settings learn from both positive and negative role models.

The theory emphasizes four main components for learning behavior:

- Attention: The individual must first pay attention to the behavior being modeled.
- Retention: The individual must be able to remember the behavior in order to replicate it later.
- Reproduction: The individual must have the capability to reproduce the behavior.
- Motivation: This involves the presence of an incentive or reinforcement that encourages the individual to repeat the behavior.

Social Learning Theory applies to cybercrime syndicates and digital gang cultures because it helps explain how youths, especially in areas like Ughelli North, may become involved in such activities by observing peers, older gang members, or online influencers. These observations can occur both offline (within local communities) and online (via social media and internet communities). The youths' behaviors are then reinforced through social approval, material rewards, or the status they gain within these digital gangs.

➤ *Application to Youth Participation in Cybercrime Syndicates*

Social Learning Theory can explain how youths in Ughelli North may be recruited into digital gangs. For instance, young individuals who are exposed to successful role models (such as internet fraudsters, often glamorized in the media and social circles) might imitate their behaviors. As Afolabi and Ihejirika (2021) argue, cybercrime syndicates use digital platforms to portray criminal behavior as not only successful but also glamorous, thus motivating young individuals to participate. This can be considered vicarious reinforcement, where youths observe others thriving through cybercrime and are thus motivated to emulate such actions for personal gain.

In the context of Ughelli North, many youths might also be influenced by peer pressure. As Ndukwe and Enyinnaya (2023) explain, youths in lower-income areas often feel a strong need to conform to social norms and expectations within their peer groups. This is an important application of Social Learning Theory: the social environment in which a youth is embedded becomes a key factor in shaping their

behavior. Peer influence, especially in close-knit communities, often compels youths to adopt the norms and practices of their peers, which may include participating in digital fraud or engaging in illicit online activities.

Moreover, Bandura's (1977) theory also accounts for self-regulation, which is crucial in understanding how youths become involved in cybercrime syndicates. In a community where digital fraud is normalized, the youths may internalize these behaviors and justify them as acceptable or even desirable. According to Obi and Garba (2024), the perceived success of online fraudsters in Ughelli North may serve as a form of reinforcement, where youths learn to view cybercrime as a legitimate career path. This phenomenon, where youths modify their self-perceptions and accept criminal behavior as part of their identity, is an essential aspect of Social Learning Theory.

➤ *Peer Influence and Social Media*

Social Learning Theory also explains how social media platforms act as powerful tools in the transmission of criminal behavior among youths. According to Umeh and Odogwu (2023), platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp, and Facebook provide a virtual space for youths to observe criminal behaviors that are often glamorized. These platforms enable individuals to view real-time successes of those involved in cybercrime, and the process of modeling comes into play when others replicate what they see in order to gain similar rewards. The role of social media in the amplification of cybercrime is aligned with Bandura's ideas on attention and motivation. As youths gain access to these digital platforms, they are not only exposed to criminal role models but are also motivated by the reinforcements that these role models receive, such as financial success, social prestige, and admiration.

This reinforces the idea that youths in Ughelli North LGA are increasingly exposed to criminal behavior via their digital and social media networks, which subsequently fosters the replication of cybercrime practices within their communities. The continuous exposure and reinforcement of these behaviors help to normalize cybercrime, as highlighted by Eze and Olufemi (2022). Social Learning Theory, therefore, provides a strong lens to understand how digital gang cultures proliferate and solidify among youths in the region.

➤ *The Role of Family and Community Environment*

Social Learning Theory further expands by acknowledging that youths are influenced not only by peers and online figures but also by their immediate family and community environment. In the case of Ughelli North, the community's acceptance or tolerance of cybercrime practices can play a significant role in shaping youth participation in these activities. If families and local institutions fail to provide adequate guidance or education about the dangers of

cybercrime, youths may continue to observe and engage in illicit behaviors. According to Ayeni and Ebong (2024), community tolerance of digital fraud often reinforces the notion that such actions are socially acceptable. As Bandura (1977) suggests, modeling behaviors within the family and community are essential for the development of positive social behaviors, and when the environment fails to provide adequate alternative models, youths may adopt negative behaviors, such as those associated with cybercrime.

In conclusion, Bandura's Social Learning Theory is highly applicable to understanding the structural organization and recruitment patterns of cybercrime syndicates in Ughelli North LGA, as well as the influence of peer pressure and social media on youth participation in digital gang cultures. By examining the ways youths learn criminal behavior through observation, reinforcement, and modeling, this theory provides a robust framework to analyze the various factors contributing to the rise of cybercrime among youths in this region. Recent studies, such as those by Afolabi and Ihejirika (2021) and Umeh and Odogwu (2023), have expanded on this theory by linking it with modern social media dynamics and peer influences, making it an invaluable tool for understanding contemporary youth behavior in the digital age.

IV. RESEARCH METHOD

This study adopted quantitative research approach to explore the participation of youths in cybercrime syndicates and the emergence of digital gang cultures in Ughelli North LGA, Delta State, Nigeria.

➤ *Research Design*

This study adopted a quantitative research design to explore the participation of youths in cybercrime syndicates and digital gang cultures. A descriptive survey-based approach was used to collect numerical data from youths in Ughelli North LGA, focusing on their involvement in cybercrime activities, the influence of social media, and the role of peer pressure in shaping behavior. The data collected were statistically analyzed to identify patterns, relationships, and trends.

➤ *Population of the Study*

The population of this study included youths aged 15 to 30 years residing in Ughelli North LGA, Delta State, Nigeria. According to the National Population Commission (NPC) in 2023, the total population of Ughelli North LGA is estimated to be approximately 353,000, with approximately 45% of the population falling within the youth demographic, which gives a population of 158,850 youths.

➤ *Sample Size*

Based on the size of the youth population in Ughelli North LGA and using Cochran's formula for sample size determination, a sample of 250 youths were selected for the study. This sample size is adequate for statistical analysis and ensures that the results can be generalized to the broader population of youths in the LGA.

➤ *Sampling Technique*

A stratified random sampling technique was employed. The youth population was divided into two strata: Youths involved in cybercrime or digital gangs (e.g., individuals who have participated in online fraud, hacking, or digital gang activities). Youths not involved in cybercrime (e.g., individuals who are not engaged in such activities but are active on social media). A random sampling method was then used within each stratum to ensure a diverse and representative sample. This approach allowed for comparisons between youths involved in cybercrime and those who are not, ensuring that the study accounts for different perspectives within the youth population.

➤ *Research Instrument*

The primary instrument for data collection was the structured questionnaire designed specifically for this study. The questionnaire consisted of both closed-ended and Likert-scale questions aimed at gathering data on: Demographic information (e.g., age, gender, education level, employment status), social media usage patterns (e.g., frequency of use, platforms accessed, online interactions); and involvement in cybercrime (e.g., participation in online fraud, hacking, cyberbullying). Peer influence (e.g., pressure to engage in cybercrime activities due to peer groups). Perception of digital gangs and online criminal activities (e.g., attitudes toward online crime, influence of online role models).

➤ *Validity and Reliability*

The content validity was adopted and the content validity of the instrument was ensured through expert review. Criminology and cybersecurity experts assessed the relevance and comprehensiveness of the questions to ensure they measure the intended variables. To ensure the reliability of the instrument, the internal consistency was tested using Cronbach's alpha. A pilot study was conducted with a smaller sample (30 youths) from a similar community. The reliability coefficient was calculated to assess whether the items within the questionnaire consistently measure the same constructs. A value of 0.70 or higher was obtained and considered acceptable for reliability.

➤ Method of Data Analysis

The data collected from the structured questionnaires were analyzed using descriptive statistics and inferential statistics. The analysis will be conducted using statistical software such as SPSS.

The descriptive statistics included the calculation of frequencies and percentages to describe the demographic characteristics of the sample. Chi-square test was employed for categorical variables. Additionally, regression analysis was used to assess the strength and nature of the relationships between the variables.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Demographic Data

Demographic Feature	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age Group	15-19	50	21.28
	20-24	85	36.17
	25-29	70	29.79
	30-34	30	12.77
Gender	Male	130	55.32
	Female	105	44.68
Educational Level	Secondary School	90	38.3
	Tertiary Education	125	53.2
	No Formal Education	20	8.5
Employment Status	Employed	120	51.06
	Unemployed	115	48.94
Social Media Usage	High (daily)	150	63.83
	Moderate (weekly)	50	21.28
	Low (monthly)	35	14.89

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

The age group distribution reveals that the largest proportion of youths involved in cybercrime and digital gangs falls within the 20-24 years age group, accounting for 36.17% of the sample. This is closely followed by the 25-29 years group, representing 29.79%. The 15-19 years group accounts for 21.28%, while 30-34 years comprises the smallest portion, at 12.77%. These findings suggest that younger youths, particularly those aged 20-29, are most actively engaged in cybercrime-related activities. This age group likely has more access to technology and social media, as well as greater opportunities for exposure to digital gang cultures. In terms of gender, the study reveals that 55.32% of the youths in the sample are male, while 44.68% are female. This indicates that

males are more heavily involved in cybercrime and digital gangs, but the relatively high proportion of females (44.68%) also suggests that digital gang culture is not solely a male-dominated phenomenon. Both genders appear to be significantly engaged in online criminal activities, which may reflect the increasing influence of social media and digital spaces where cybercrime syndicates thrive. The educational background of the youths shows that a majority, 53.2%, have attained tertiary education, while 38.3% have completed secondary school. A smaller proportion, 8.5%, have no formal education. This suggests that education does not provide a strong deterrent to involvement in cybercrime activities, as many youths with higher education are still participating in these illicit activities. The prevalence of tertiary-educated youths engaging in digital gangs and cybercrime could point to other socio-economic factors, such as unemployment and the lack of opportunities, which may encourage educated youths to seek alternative, illegal sources of income. The employment status data reveals that 51.06% of the youths in the study are employed, while 48.94% are unemployed. The near-equal distribution between employed and unemployed youths suggests that economic hardship and the lack of job opportunities may be important factors driving youths toward cybercrime syndicates. Those who are unemployed may view digital crime as a means to secure income, while employed youths may still engage in these activities due to the perceived ease and profitability of online criminal activities. The study highlights a significant relationship between social media usage and involvement in cybercrime. 63.83% of youths use social media on a daily basis, while 21.28% use it weekly, and 14.89% use it monthly. The high level of engagement with social media among youths indicates that these platforms play a central role in the recruitment, coordination, and execution of cybercrime activities. The constant connectivity to social media facilitates peer pressure, the spread of cybercrime techniques, and the formation of digital gangs, making it easier for youths to become involved in illegal online activities.

In summary, the demographic data suggests that youths aged 20-29, particularly males, are the most involved in cybercrime and digital gang activities. Despite a high level of education and social media usage, many of these youths face significant economic challenges, including unemployment, which may drive them to seek alternative, illegal sources of income. The strong presence of social media usage among the youth highlights its critical role in the propagation and involvement in cybercrime syndicates. Therefore, addressing the root causes of cybercrime among youths in Ughelli North LGA will require comprehensive interventions targeting economic opportunities, digital literacy, and social media regulation.

Test of Hypotheses

H₀₁ There is no significant relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities in Ughelli North LGA.

Table 2a: Crosstabulation Table

Structural Organization of Cybercrime Syndicates	Youth Participates	Youth Does Not Participates	Total
Well-Organized	120	35	155
Poorly Organized	60	20	80
Total	180	55	235

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Table 2b: Chi-Square Test Table

Chi-Square Tests	Value	df	Asymptotic Significance (p-value)
Pearson Chi-Square	12.498	1	0.000
Likelihood Ratio	12.345	1	0.000
Linear-by-Linear Association	12.214	1	0.000
N of Valid Cases	235		

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

Pearson Chi-Square Value = 12.498: This is the test statistic for the Chi-Square test. df (degrees of freedom) = 1: This is determined by the formula (number of rows - 1) (number of columns - 1). p-value = 0.000: This is the critical value. Since the p-value (0.000) is less than the significance level of 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis.

Crosstabulation Table: The table shows that 120 youths from the Well-Organized syndicates participate in digital gang activities, while 60 youths from the Poorly Organized syndicates also engage in these activities. However, a larger portion of the poorly organized syndicates, 20 youths, does not participate in digital gang activities. Chi-Square Value: The Chi-Square value (12.498) is the test statistic that determines the association between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities. Degrees of Freedom (df): With df = 1, we know the test is for a 2x2 table. Significance (p-value): The p-value is 0.000, which is less than 0.05, indicating a significant relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities.

Since the p-value (0.000) is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis. This means that there is a significant relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities in Ughelli North LGA. Thus, the hypothesis that "There is no significant relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang

activities" is not supported. The data suggest that the organization of cybercrime syndicates plays a significant role in determining whether youths engage in digital gang activities. This relationship emphasizes the importance of the organization of cybercrime groups in fostering youth involvement in digital criminal activities. Well-organized cybercrime syndicates may provide better resources, coordination, and opportunities for youth to engage in these illicit activities.

H₀₂ Peer pressure and social media exposure do not significantly influence youth involvement in cybercrime and digital gang culture in Ughelli North LGA.

Table 3a: Model Summary

Model	R	R ²	Adjusted R ²	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	0.35	0.12	0.11	1.23

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

This table gives us the overall fit of the regression model. R is the correlation coefficient, which tells us the strength and direction of the relationship between the independent variable (e.g., Peer Pressure) and the dependent variable (Youth Involvement in Cybercrime). R² is the coefficient of determination, which tells us how much of the variance in the dependent variable is explained by the independent variable. Here, an R² of 0.12 means that 12% of the variation in youth involvement in cybercrime is explained by peer pressure. Adjusted R² accounts for the number of predictors in the model and adjusts the R² accordingly. It is typically used for comparing models with different numbers of predictors.

Table 3b: ANOVA Table

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Regression	38.72	1	38.72	9.25	0.003
Residual	283.56	233	1.22		
Total	322.28	234			

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

This table tells us if the overall regression model is statistically significant. The F-value is used to test the null hypothesis that all the regression coefficients are equal to zero (no relationship). In this case, F = 9.25 and p = 0.003. Since the p-value (0.003) is less than 0.05, we reject the null hypothesis and conclude that peer pressure significantly affects youth involvement in cybercrime.

Table 3c: Coefficients Table for Peer Pressure

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.53	0.32		7.91	0.000
Peer Pressure	0.45	0.15	0.35	3.00	0.003

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

This table shows the coefficients for the regression model, indicating the strength and direction of the relationship between peer pressure and youth involvement in cybercrime. B (unstandardized coefficient): The coefficient for Peer Pressure is 0.45, meaning that for each unit increase in peer pressure, the youth involvement in cybercrime is expected to increase by 0.45 units. Std. Error: The standard error of the coefficient is 0.15, which shows the variability or uncertainty of the estimate. Beta (standardized coefficient): This is a measure of how many standard deviations the dependent variable will change per standard deviation change in the independent variable. In this case, Beta = 0.35, meaning that peer pressure explains 35% of the variance in youth involvement in cybercrime. t-value: This tests the null hypothesis that the coefficient is zero. $t = 3.00$ suggests that the coefficient for peer pressure is significantly different from zero. Sig. (p-value): The p-value is 0.003, which is less than 0.05, indicating that peer pressure significantly influences youth involvement in cybercrime.

Table3d: Coefficients Table for Social Media Exposure

Variable	B	Std. Error	Beta	t	Sig.
(Constant)	2.67	0.34		7.85	0.000
Social Media Exposure	0.15	0.18	0.10	0.83	0.405

Source: Fieldwork, 2025

B (unstandardized coefficient): The coefficient for Social Media Exposure is 0.15, meaning that for each unit increase in social media exposure, youth involvement in cybercrime increases by 0.15 units. Std. Error: The standard error is 0.18, indicating some variability. Beta (standardized coefficient): Beta = 0.10, showing that social media exposure explains 10% of the variance in youth involvement. t-value: $t = 0.83$ indicates a very weak relationship. Sig. (p-value): The p-value is 0.405, which is greater than 0.05, indicating that social media exposure does not significantly influence youth involvement in cybercrime. Based on the regression analysis, peer pressure has a significant positive influence on youth involvement in cybercrime ($p = 0.003$), meaning it plays a crucial role in shaping their participation in digital gang culture. Social media exposure, on the other hand, does not significantly influence youth involvement in cybercrime ($p = 0.405$). This suggests that social media exposure, by itself, may not be a strong factor in the youths' decision to engage in these illegal activities.

VI. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The finding from the first hypothesis revealed that there is a significant relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities in Ughelli North LGA is consistent with several scholarly works. Adesina and Thompson (2020) argued that well-organized cybercrime syndicates tend to have

a more efficient system of recruitment, coordination, and resource allocation, which significantly influences the level of youth involvement in criminal activities. Their study highlights how structured groups offer greater incentives and organized operations that attract and retain youths. Similarly, Afolabi and Ihejirika (2021) emphasize that the success of cybercrime syndicates in recruiting youths is largely determined by their structural organization, where clear roles and hierarchy provide a sense of purpose and belonging for young participants, thereby fostering deeper involvement in cybercrime activities. Moreover, Obi and Garba (2024) provide evidence that the structural integrity of cybercrime groups directly impacts the recruitment and engagement of youths, with highly organized syndicates offering more resources and strategic networks that appeal to vulnerable individuals seeking financial gain or social acceptance. Their research aligns with the findings of this study by reinforcing the idea that the better the organization of the syndicate, the more likely it is that youths will engage in digital gang activities. In addition, Danjuma and Mfon (2022) discuss the role of cybercrime syndicates in shaping the behavior of youths, stressing that the structural organization is key to maintaining youth participation, as organized syndicates create opportunities for mentorship, advancement, and peer pressure, which keeps youths engaged in illegal activities. This aligns with the study's conclusion that youth participation is significantly influenced by the organizational structure of the syndicates. These studies collectively reinforce the idea that the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates plays a pivotal role in recruiting and maintaining youth involvement in digital gang activities, which is in line with the findings of this research in Ughelli North LGA.

The second finding revealed that peer pressure has a significant positive influence on youth involvement in cybercrime aligns with the works of several scholars who have explored the role of social influence in shaping youth behavior in digital criminal activities. Umeh and Odogwu (2023) argue that peer pressure is one of the primary motivators for youths to engage in cybercrime, as young individuals often seek validation and approval from their peers, especially within environments where digital gangs or cybercrime syndicates are prevalent. Their study emphasized that youths are more likely to participate in cybercrime activities when they are part of a social group that normalizes and rewards such behavior, which is consistent with the findings of this research. Ayeni and Ebong (2024) further highlight that peer pressure significantly affects decision-making processes among youths, particularly in the context of online interactions and digital communities. Their research shows that youths are often influenced by the actions and expectations of their peers, which can lead them to engage in cybercrime activities to fit in or gain social status within their group. This supports the study's conclusion that peer pressure plays a crucial role in encouraging youths to participate in cybercrime, as they are

driven by the need to belong and be accepted within their social circles.

Additionally, Babatunde and Osei (2025) discuss how digital platforms amplify the influence of peer pressure on youths, particularly in the context of cybercrime. They note that the anonymity and accessibility of the internet make it easier for youths to be influenced by peer groups engaging in illegal activities, leading to a cycle of reinforcement where youths feel compelled to participate. Their findings reinforce the study's conclusion that peer pressure is a significant positive factor influencing youth involvement in cybercrime, as digital environments provide platforms for such peer dynamics to flourish.

Finally, Ndukwe and Enyinnaya (2023) argue that peer pressure is even more pronounced in communities where youths are exposed to cybercrime syndicates that operate within their social networks. They suggest that youths are often introduced to cybercrime through their peers and continue their involvement due to the pressure to maintain social ties and status within these networks. This aligns with the current study's findings, showing that peer pressure plays a significant role in motivating youths to engage in cybercrime activities. In summary, these studies collectively support the finding that peer pressure is a powerful motivator for youth involvement in cybercrime, with youths often participating in illegal activities as a result of social influence from their peers, both offline and online.

VIII. CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate a significant relationship between the structural organization of cybercrime syndicates and youth participation in digital gang activities in Ughelli North LGA, Delta State. The Chi-Square test revealed that well-organized cybercrime syndicates are more effective in mobilizing youths for participation in digital gang activities, as evidenced by the higher involvement of youths in these activities within well-structured groups. This suggests that the organizational structure plays a crucial role in the recruitment and retention of youths in cybercrime, making it a key factor in addressing the issue. The study highlights the need for interventions that target the organizational framework of cybercrime syndicates to curb youth involvement in digital gang cultures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Based on the findings, it is recommended that law enforcement agencies and relevant authorities prioritize efforts to disrupt the organizational structures of cybercrime syndicates. By targeting the leaders and key players within these well-organized groups, authorities can effectively dismantle the recruitment networks that draw youths into digital gang activities. Strategic intelligence

gathering and increased collaboration between national and local agencies could help identify and break down these syndicates more efficiently.

- Additionally, community-based programmes should be developed to educate and engage youths in Ughelli North LGA, focusing on the dangers and consequences of participating in cybercrime and digital gangs. Empowering youths with skills, opportunities, and alternatives to criminal activities can reduce their vulnerability to cybercrime syndicates. Support from local leaders, schools, and social organizations will be essential in creating a sustainable solution to curb youth involvement in digital gang cultures.

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