The Role of Religious Ethical Values in Stemming the Tides of Cybercrime among Youths in Nigeria

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Abstract
Cybercrime has become a household phenomenon in Nigeria, particularly among young people who are mostly actively involved in the crime. Cyber shenanigans are perpetuated in different forms, such as credit card or bank account hacking and unsolicited emails and text messages to unsuspecting persons by fraudsters through the aid of the internet accessible with computers or mobile phones. Cybercrime is ethically and morally wrong because they cause pain to victims or destroy the lives of those involved, which is completely against moral codes in a humane society. The study aimed to investigate the reality of cyber fraud among youths in Nigeria and highlight the role of religious ethical values in stemming this evil tide, with the understanding that humans, including cybercriminals, are religiously conscious beings living among people. The study adopts a historical research methodology to systematically recapture the complex nature of cybercrime and youth participation in Nigeria through a critical review of relevant literature. The study revealed that the quest for wealth and fame among youth in Nigeria and the rush to measure up with their peers in the society could be attributed to the reason why many youths engage in the illicit venture of cybercrime, even though it is against their faith and falls short of religious, moral, or ethical values. The study therefore, argued that if properly engaged, religious moral values could serve as transformative tools towards right values among young people. The study concludes and recommends that the fight against criminality, especially cybercrime, is the sole responsibility of every member of society, but that the religious community must play a vital role in teaching adherents that going against or breaking existing laws is both punishable by God and society.

Keywords: Cybercrime, Youth, Unemployment, Religion, Ethical Values, Nigeria.

Introduction

The tendency to use religion for positive or negative gains, whether relating to character or virtue, has been an age-long argument among scholars of religions globally. This debate is even more complicated, particularly in Africa, where religion has assumed a dangerous 'weapon' in society, because it now serves as a means of political recognition to the detriment of the electorates or to improve economic and charismatic relevance among clergies, instead of using it in the services of God and humanity. Although, we cannot equivocally conclude that religion remains the major reason while the African continent as a whole cannot measure up in areas of technological advancement as compared to Europe and America. Although African country like South Africa have tried to break the shackle of religious bigotry to some extents and in their effort to embraced secularism. Whereas Nigeria has been labelled consistently with derogatory nomenclatures like 'notorious' and 'overtly religious' people by Western scholars. According to African countries are rich in culture and values that continue to shape the African cosmology and philosophy due to its accommodating nature (Marloes 647). There are over 250 ethnic nationalities in Africa that has served as a guiding light for countless generations, molding the moral and ethical foundation of societies across the continent (Falola par. 2). These are some of the reasons why it was literally easy for Europeans missionaries and the Arabian merchants to penetrate in the southern and northern protectorates of Nigeria where they spread Christianity and Islamic massage to the people without any form of hindrances.

It is interesting to note that the immoral act of cybercrime did not originate from the African continent, rather it first surfaced in the European state of France in 1834, where the first cyber-attack took place and cybercriminals stole financial market information by gaining access into the French telegraph system (Wolf par.1). Since then, cybercrime has become the compound name for rule-breaking behaviours, such as cyber-fraud, cyber-bullying, cyber-stalking and cyber espionage in the cyber spaces (Hutchings and Chua 169; Lazarus, 65). As Africans began to be aware of the illicit trade of cybercrime, it is unfortunate that Nigerian youths have taken the centre stage with the bulk of cybercriminals emanating from our space, where they represent ninety percent of the active population (Adeniran 20; Ojedokun & Eraye 1002). Cybercrime involves defrauding victims of monetary values, and many young people in Nigeria most especially job seekers and university undergraduates, have taken the trade as a means of

employment with the hope that through it they will become rich one day (Lazarus 67). Osuntuyi, Ireyomi and Aluko express their worries about the increasing number of youths joining cybercrime in Nigeria when they opine that:

> Many people, especially the youth, are getting involved day by day. They are participating actively in one form of Internet fraud or the other, majorly known in cyberspace as cybercrime, but known in the Nigerian parlance as *Yahoo Yahoo…*, cybercrime is a fast-growing expanse of crime, and this crime has continued unabated with the day-to-day involvement of many youths who are infused with the get-rich-quick syndrome (51).

The quest for quick wealth and the corrupt lifestyle often displayed by politicians has unequivocally forced many young people into illegal means of making money at all costs, including cybercrime and other forms of shenanigans that readily come to mind. This challenge of rich quick tendency is dramatised in our music industries today and on social media, including music stars who occasionally flaunt expensive jewellery, displacing and talking about the necessity of making wealth at any cost, in their songs, has paved the way for more crimes in society. This kind of lifestyle has become part of us because we have gradually built societies that no longer give credence to hard work, rather one that celebrates criminality instead of virtue, even among Christians and Muslims. For instance, social media was flooded in 2023 with the untimely demise of a Nigerian popular musician and Afrobeats star Ilerioluwa Oladimeji Aloba, popularly known as 'Mohbad', who we alleged to have "died why trying to get rich" in the music industry because today new generational record labels are co-founded by Yahoo-boys (Lazarus, 69).

The cybercrime phenomenon remains one of the greatest challenges of the twenty-first century and has escalated to what Osuntuyi, Ireyomi and Aluko et al described as *Yahoo Plus*, that is, the blending of spiritual elements with internet surfing (51). Many have identified the influence and roles of religious leaders as promoters of cybercrime activity in Nigeria as negative. According to Osuntuyi, Ireyomi and Aluko, Christianity, Islam and African traditional religion glamorised cybercrimes because "*Yahoo boys and girls* make use of spiritual ingredients that can help them successfully scam their victims by hypnotising them, even though their victims might be aware of the prevalence of cybercrime in the scheme (62-63).

This paper explores the role of religious ethical values in moderating negative criminal behaviours and other forms of youthful delinquency, and promoting positive values and conduct

in the society can transform society. Therefore, the first section conceptualises and theorises cybercrime and youth, providing relevant examples. The next section deals with Nigerian youth and the cybercrime phenomenon, next is the role of religious ethical values in mitigating the menace of cybercrime and then conclusions and recommendations.

Conceptualisation and Theoretical Clarification of Concepts:

Religious Ethical Values

Religious ethical values are the product of sacred religious texts, which usually resonate with major world religions, such as Christianity, Islam, Judaism and African Traditional Religion, etc. In the context of this study, however, the sacred religious text of Christianity is the focus, although with a comparative analysis of other sacred scriptures that are believed to have a significant place in the life of adherents due to the valid cultural and moral teachings of its founders. Although the purpose of this study is not to compare the moral values of both religious experiences, rather to stress the rich morals inherent in both religions and how they can engender sound ethical principles, particularly among the youth, so as to build trust and a meaningful, humane society.

Furthermore, religious ethical values can be understood within the framework of religious beliefs and practices, texts, sacred spaces, symbols, piety, and the life and influence of a particular founder, that became a stander for followers as they get acquainted with certain values, due to the positive roles they play in shaping such religious cultures and traditions in the society (Bobyreva et al 2). The development of religious ethical values is usually a complex process, because religion itself signifies the 'most good' which can be expected or hoped for from this world. Hence, religious values are the "stable belief that a certain model of human behaviour or the ultimate goal of a person's existence is the only preferable one from a social and personal point of view, rather than a different manner of behaviour or some other ultimate goal of existence" (Bobyreva et al, 2-3). For the purpose of clarity religious ethical values are decorated with terms such as norms, morals, traits, and attitudes, which are different from one religious consciousness to another. In the Christian worldview, for instance, its own system of values lays the basic foundation of faith, expecting adherents to follow accordingly for the promotion of it religious norms and for societal acceptance. Although, virtually every religion in the world uphold high standard of morality, either as a written code, or as a moral disposition, that admonished followers to leave an acceptable lives as they engaged in human society, keeping to

4

the ideas that immoral and unethical ways of life are absurd and causes pain to humanity and further devalued such faith in the eyes of the public. Therefore, no world religion, be it Asianic, Jewish or African, will out rightly defend the immoral and unrighteous acts of criminality in any form and in whatsoever society because the attempt to swindle a gullible person, through any form of fraudulent means, is will be evil, and has the capability of causing moral and psychological pains (Ihuah and Ojoma 1379).

Youth and the challenges of unemployment in Nigeria

There are different descriptions and definitions of youth by different states, organisations and scholars alike. This is because it is a difficult task to categorically assert the meaning of the word 'youth' to a certain age or group, as the case may be. However, there is a consensus among scholars, which says that youths, are future leaders; an understanding that has propelled countries across the world to pay unresolved attentions to young people through development and skill acquisition initiative in other to keep them out of crime (Obomese 246; Mbachu and Alake par. 1-2; Gonyok par. 3). Furthermore, Kalagbor and Deinibiteim in an attempt to define the term youth, quoted the United Nations Education Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and assert that the term "Is best understood as a period of transition from the dependence of childhood to adulthood - independence and the awareness of our interdependence as member of a community (4)." Therefore, the youthful age can also be conceptualised as the transition period from dependence to independence, which is from childhood to adulthood in the life journey of a human being.

The United Nations Organisation (UNO par.1), for statistical consistency across regions, defined 'youth' as those persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, and this view is without prejudice to other definitions by member states. Akande corroborated the United Nations Organisation when he opined that 'youth' or young adult is any person between the ages of 18 and 24 years (2). Furthermore, Kalagbor and Deinibiteim expatriated by employing some characteristics to define the term youth, thus:

> Persons who normally would have completed secondary education, and would either be in tertiary institutions such as the university, striving to secure employment, or already employed. This group of persons would need post-secondary education, employment and reproductive health information and services (2-3).

Interestingly, as the youth population grows, so does the unemployment rate increase beyond proportion in Nigeria. The youth unemployment rate in Nigeria in 2022, for instance, was estimated at 13.44 percent according to source data available with the International Labour Organisation (Statista par.1). However, the African Youth Charter (AYC) differs completely in their definition of a youth. According to AYC, the "youth is any person between the ages of 15 and 35 years old" (20). In the same vein, the second National Youth Policy Document of the Federal Republic of Nigeria 2009 describes youths as "persons between the ages of 18 and 35 years of age. Kalagbor and Deinibiteim, adopting what they called the 'transition from dependence to independence Schema', outline certain distinct features that are characterised by the youth as follows:

(a) Leaving the parental home and establishing a new living arrangement for themselves;

(b) Completing full-time education in most cases, tertiary;

(c) Forming close, stable personal relationships outside of the family, often resulting in marriage and procreation, and finally;

(d) Testing the labour market, finding work and possibly settling into a career, and achieving a more or less sustainable livelihood (3).

The above indicates that the youthful period is the age when an individual is most active in life, seeking education, functional skills and employment opportunities, etc. Indeed, at that age, young people are very energetic and are in search of where they would deploy such energy into and when they are not guided towards gainfully using it, is usually expended into crimes and all forms of shenanigans that are common with the youths. The youth, at times, are usually full of anxiety of not having the knowledge of what the future holds for them; hence, they are agitated and ask questions such as What does the future hold? What roles and positions can I fit into in society? These are the daily thoughts of most Nigerian youth, especially when they have completely lost hope in the government of the day.

Theorizing Cybercrime

Several scholarly literatures deal with the concept and theories of cybercrime. A significant amount of this literature has emanated from the social sciences disciplines, while very little has emanated from the humanities as a social phenomenon. Although researchers from the

arts and humanities across the world and in the global south have made resounding attempts towards bridging this gap by opening the field through extensive research in digital humanities and other areas of interest. Consequently, the distending threat of cybercrime became influential in interdisciplinary research aimed at discovering correlates and predictors of online crime and victimisation, pioneering researchers in the field theorising and conceptualising cybercrime, especially from the social sciences fields of enquiry, such as sociology and psychology, but with very few scholars in religious studies and moral philosophers lately. Meanwhile, pioneering scholars in the field of cybercrime include Russell Smith, Michael L. Pittaro, Cathering D. Marcum, Kasun Jayawardena, Roderick Broadhurst and Jaishankar Karuppanan, just to mention a few that have made significant contributions to the study of cybercrime globally. However, over time, researchers have emerged who explore various studies in cybercrime and the *Yahoo Yahoo* phenomenon from other disciplines, which have brought about the thousands of literatures that exist today in the study.

Nevertheless, one thing that has taken precedence lately is the fact that since the new millennium, there has been a continuous attempt to apply traditional criminological theories to the study of cybercrime, which has been decolonised by scholars from other fields of study, especially from Africa. Hitherto, most articles or studies investigating the cybercrime phenomenon were marginalised by top-tier academic journals, which focus on more traditional topics; as a result, cybercrime researchers still represent a very small minority in the overall criminologist community today (Holt and Bossler 20). The implication, therefore, is that most cybercrime theories evolved from a criminological background, which is not healthy enough for global scholarship because it prevents a broader spectrum of wider academic debates that would have impacted other fields of study that attempt to proffer solutions to the challenges of cyber-criminality, which poses a great threat to human society at large.

According to Holt and Bossler three cybercrime theories have been successfully and extensively tested, and they have produced mixed results over time about the phenomenon. These theories include "self-control theory, social learning theory, and lifestyles-routine activities theory" (Holt and Bossler 21). The self-control theory and social learning theories have both discovered some empirical support explaining the underlying motivations of some types of cybercrimes. Although most criminologists focus on the aspect of criminal behaviours explained by self-control theory, which includes acts such as deviant, sinful, and reckless. The term 'self-

control' is defined as the propensity to refrain from acts whose long-term costs outweigh their immediate advantages (Holt and Bossler 21). It postulates that individuals who lack self-control will pursue acts that immediately gratify their impulses, such as substance abuse from smoking, gambling, speeding in automobiles, and imprudent sexual conduct (Valasik 1). Furthermore, Burruss, & Bossler (38), and Choi (40) all advocated for the self-control theory (SCT), emphasizing that it is the most appropriate theory to be applied in the study of cybercrime, because it addresses essential and important known delinquencies that are youth related such as smoking, gambling, immoral sexual conducts and other social vises often perpetuated in the society. However, SCT was first proposed by Michael Gottfredson and Travis Hirschi in their book "A General Theory of Crime" in 1990. Since then, the theory has been a subject of discussion and serves as several empirical studies which test the theory and compare it with other criminological theories (Karl-Dieter, 45).

Nigerian Youth and the Cybercrime Phenomenon

A newspaper report published online by Daily Post on the 25th of October, 2023, according to the rider "Cybercrime: Police nab six, shutdown Abuja 'Yahoo Academy'" describe how the Nigerian police uncovered a recruitment centre for young people between the ages of 19 to 27 who showed interest in acquiring skills in cyber-fraud (Ochogwu par. 2). In the report, some of the youth confessed to teaching skills ranging from identity theft, hacking, and trading hacked Facebook accounts, romance scams, and other computer fraud and forgery. This immoral situation is almost getting out of hand, and many have attributed the cause to the high rate of youth unemployment in Nigeria. According to the National Bureau of Statistics report published online by Macrotrent.net (2024) indicate that unemployment rates has escalate from year to year, for example in 2018 and 2022 the number of unemployed persons constituted a 0.43% in 2018; in 12.59% in 2019; 1.76% in 2019; 14.35% in 2020; a decline from 07% in 2020; 13.65% in 2021; with a further decline 0.21% in 2021; 13.44% in 2022.

In the case of age group, the report shows that as at March 2009, persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, representing 41.6% were unemployed, and those between the ages of 25 and 44 years old, (17%) were under-employed. This alarming rate of unemployment has led to an increase in cyber and other crimes in Nigeria, perpetuated by young people. Therefore, one of the ways by which this can be prevented is for the government to create jobs for youths involved in the so-called Yahoo Yahoo business (Osuntuyi, Ireyomi & Aluko 51). Every year, several people

are victims of cyber-attack in Nigeria, and it is in the public that young adult male Nigerians (youths), mainly university students/graduates, constitute the bulk of cyber-fraudsters in the country (Tade & Aliyu, 861).

Unemployment has been attributed as the major factor responsible for cybercrime and other forms of crime among the youth in Nigeria. Greater number of Nigerian graduates is unemployed (Oko, 2020:194). Many secondary school leavers and university graduates, frustrated due to the inability to secure a job or maybe a good pay job, often, believe that it is better to plough their talents into crimes and other vices since it is another way of making money without necessarily having to sweat under the sun, rather what it required is just a computer or smart mobile phone and the skill to operate them.

Cybercrime is usually perpetrated through electronic communication networks, particularly through the internet connected to either a laptop or smartphones. The menace is rampant among youths who are graduates or undergraduates and has done incalculable damage to the image of Nigeria globally. Cybercrime is in types which include internet calls, sending of scam emails containing "get rich quick" proposals to entice unsuspecting victims in a bid to defraud them, cyber bullying and etc. In the case of email, sometimes it comes in the form of marriage proposals, purported unclaimed fund, donation, lottery, help, bonanza, bank transaction notification/credit alert and other kinds of scheming. Some of the youths send as many as 10,000 of such scam emails every day, while others send more to increase their chances of getting victims that will fall to their prey (Onadipe, 10).

The economic motive that links across the types of cybercrimes, as already alluded to above, is the connection between unemployment and cybercrime in Nigeria. Suffice it to say here that it is not only the unemployed that engage in cybercrime; however, it is generally believed as argued by Ademola & Olajubutu, that "a critical cause of social vices in the society is unemployment and it manifests itself in the form of kidnapping, armed robbery, political mercenaries, destitution and cybercrime" (82). Similarly, Anderson submitted that "the failure of the state's macro-economy will lead to youths' recklessness given that the majority who are unemployed are the most affected, and if not contained, will degenerate into social vices such as cybercrime in the society" (85). The actions of the youths will be hinged on the fact that the governmental institutions have failed them and the best way to get back at the state is to seize and engage in nefarious acts to survive. Little wonder, in Nigeria, the youths who are educated

but unable to secure decent employment are the ones at the forefront of crimes in the country, not to mention cyber-crimes, which is becoming more or less a haven for them. (Obaro 36). This situation is made worse by the fact that the social-cultural norms in Nigeria despise poverty but magnify material wealth, giving little or no room for hard work. Hence, many Nigerian youths just want to appear successful no matter how they made it, and society celebrates success regardless of how it is attained.

The Role of Religious Ethical Values in Mitigating the Menace of Cybercrime

Since cybercrime is a shameful deviant criminal activity capable of destroying not just the image of the perpetrators but that of their nation, it became imperative to suggest some means it can be mitigated. Therefore, religious values have played a significant role in shaping ethical and moral values in society, and cybercrimes are a societal phenomenon. The fundamental beliefs and teachings of religious ethical values have been used as a foundation for moral principles and codes in many societies throughout history to determine behaviours and moral formation from time to time.

Therefore, religious ethical values are essential moral principles that guide one's behaviour and decision making and are inherent in religious traditions, texts and beliefs, which involve the teaching of values, norms, morals and practices that can influence the lives of people in everyday experience (Obomese and Mande 123). Elsayed, Lestari and Brougham argued that elements of religious ethical values, such as morality, codes of practice, codes of conduct, and other punitive measures, are some of the rules that have been used to control numerous kinds of social traits in society over time (16). The aforementioned can be adjudged to be correct because religious spiritual values have a positive influence on one's perception, choices, actions, and relationships with others, and spiritually conscious people act in godly ways, displaying spirituality as a control measure for unethical behaviour. This can be explored in relation to the unethical practices of cybercrime among youths in Nigeria.

Consequently, religion has often been seen as a unifying factor that is able to help in situations like the case of cybercrime and all its other shades among young people. Therefore, since religion plays important roles in human society at large, it can thus be said that religious ethical values may act as a controlling or bonding force to prevent crimes. It is interesting to note that one of the functions of religion is to influence people's inner feelings, causes a kind of self-control and social function, religion favours systems and organisations that are exposed to

changes and also provides social solidarity through people's participation in religious ceremonies and respect for sacred things (Nevisi and Sharafi 2). Religious ethical values try to prevent the roots of crime, its motivation and the formation of criminal thoughts, and as a result stop their occurrence or the means by which crimes are perpetuated. Generally, religion can be said to play a major role in controlling people in dangerous and crime-causing situations, and although it uses all its efforts for prevention, it is also used to reform the criminal and prevent repeated crimes from happening (Nevisi and Sharafi 3).

Religious crime and sin have always existed together since mankind stepped into the material world and the realm of existence, as pictured in the creation account in the book of Genesis. Therefore, since then, mankind has always tasted deviations, deviance from the proper standard, destructions and crimes with their bitter taste. A critical look at religious teachings reveals that what is referred to today as crime prevention was a combination of heavenly messages and the guidance of prophets and divine saints. In order words, the mission of religion is to liberate man from corruption and misguidance; hence, religious leaders did not spare any efforts to realize it and before fighting the disability, they fought the cause and background of sin and crime, and on this basis, prevention of deviation and crookedness is one of the duties of religious leaders who are expected to through their messages transform sinners into saints (Nevisi and Sharafi 3).

Unfortunately, several government efforts towards enforcing and reinforcing punitive laws to dissuade citizens, especially the young people, from committing or engaging in cybercrime and other social delinquencies in society have proved abortive, and this crime persists with no end in sight. Instead, they kept discovering different and innovative ways of committing it. Therefore, the failure of all these human solutions, obviously proves the fact that absolutely relying on the wisdom and intellect, with no use of religious teachings, human beings are not able to pursue their felicity and struggle misguide and deviation because religious teachings has the power to lower the paths towards and drastically reduce crime rates in the society (Vaezi and Kashkolli 508).

The fast erosion in morality or the absence of religious moral values has been identified as one of the greatest reasons why many young promising youths get involved in crimes without evaluating the social and moral consequences of their actions (Anderson 88; Ademola & Olajubutu 80; Obomese & Mande 125). In the past, religious values have contributed to good

moral behaviour among young people in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, but today the case is completely different. For instance, the teachings in Christianity were regarded as the tools for conveying the message of peace and holy living among the people in society. This is because it exposes evil and outlines punishments meant for those engaging in the various evils; therefore, moral values were transmitted through the accumulation of the knowledge of good moral conduct in the society (Ogueche et al, 2021). Although there is a widely held notion and perception among religious psychologists that those who believe in the Devil and the hereafter (death) are as likely to commit delinquency as people who do not believe in a supernatural world (Adamczyk et al, 2017). This speculation aligns with most of the studies that have been conducted by researchers in religion and criminology, even though much work has not been done on the relationship between religion and crime, because religion can be employed to manage criminal tendencies such as cybercrime and other related shenanigans prevalent among young people in society. According to Adamczyk, Freilich, & Chunrye, citing Johnson et al, and Baier & Write, observed that "adhering to religious association and tenets produces less crime in society" (10). To substantiate this fact, a meta-analysis of 60 studies published between 1969 and 1998 found that religious beliefs and behaviour exert a moderate negative effect on individuals' criminal behaviour in society" (3).

Conclusion and Recommendation

I have argued in this work that the tendency to use religion for positive or negative purposes abounds in society abound even though the overall aim of religion is to produce in adherents some sense of virtues and acceptable characters. However, the reverse has been the case, and this is even more complicated, particularly in Africa, where religion is severely used as a weapon of manipulation and marginalisation.

Furthermore, religious ethical values are the product of sacred religious texts and spirituality, which mainly resonate with major world religions such Christianity, Islam and Judaism, to name just a few. In the context of this study, however, I focused on the sacred religious text of Christianity, although with a comparative analysis of other sacred scriptures that are significant, like Islam, due to its validity and existential value for its cultural and moral teachings on ethical principles and standards in society.

Furthermore, in this study, I conceptualized religious ethical values from the frameworks of religious beliefs and practices, texts, codes, sacred spaces, symbols, piety, and the influence of religious leaders and founders for shaping life and how it will help in curbing deviant and other forms of anti-social practices, such as cybercrime, particularly among the youth in Nigeria. I here recommend that the fight against criminality, especially cybercrime, is the responsibility of all, but the religious community has the following roles to play:

1.   To teach members of their congregation that breaking extent law is punishable by God and

2.   Take the teaching of morality seriously and inculcate values in their member, especially the youth who form the majority of their population.

3.   Teach the value of hard work and respect for authority and senior citizens, who are sometimes mostly the victims of cybercrime in society

4.   Government and stakeholders should engage the youth and the positive use of their talents instead of trying to kill them

5.   Introduce a youth empowerment program that will drive policy change and bring back the confidence of the youth in government and society.

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