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submission@journalofpeopleandworldviews.com

Contacts

+2348032325087

eic@journalofpeopleandworldviews.com

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Theoretical Article

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Amartya Sen's Capability Approach to Educational Freedoms for Diverse Learners

Abstract

Traditional educational metrics often fail to capture the real freedoms and opportunities available to diverse learners, particularly those from marginalized backgrounds. While access to schooling has expanded, substantial gaps persist in the quality and relevance of education, limiting individuals' ability to convert resources into valued achievements. This study aimed to critically explore how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach can reconstruct and expand the conceptualization of educational freedoms for a diverse learner population. The central problem addressed is the inadequacy of standardized, attainment-focused models in recognizing and nurturing the varied capabilities that different students have reason to value. Theoretically, the study is pitched in Sen's Capability Approach, which shifts the evaluative focus from mere resources (e.g., school facilities) or outcomes (e.g., test scores) to the substantive freedoms which are the capabilities that individuals have to lead the kinds of lives they value. Methodologically, the study employed a qualitative systematic review, synthesizing existing literature to analyze how core concepts of functioning, capabilities, and conversion factors can be applied to inclusive educational practice. The analysis concluded that the Capability Approach provides a robust normative framework for evaluating educational equity, emphasizing the expansion of students' genuine opportunities rather than the standardization of their outputs. A major recommendation arising from this is that educational policy and assessment must become more participatory and pluralistic, actively designed to identify and support the diverse capability sets of all learners, thereby making freedom a central goal of education.

Keywords: Capability Approach, Educational Freedoms, Diverse Learners, Inclusive Education, Curriculum Design.

Richard Owusu
University of Africa, Zambia
Department of Education
Phone Number: +27 60 421 9776
ORCID ID: 0009-0007-8273-4954
(Corresponding Author)

Gabriel Amponsah
University of South Africa, South Africa, Faculty of Law
Gabrielamponsah1986@gmail.com
Phone Number: +27 83 312 3012
ORCID ID: 0009-0000-7843-5037

Solomon Mintah Afari
Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Ghana
Faculty of Educational Studies
smafari@st.knust.edu.gh
Phone Number: +233 541 460 565
ORCID ID: 0009-0001-0405-655X

Corresponding Author's Email:
Kwamenoah521@gmail.com

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Introduction

Despite decades of educational reform and increased investment in schooling infrastructure, vast numbers of learners particularly those from marginalized communities remain confined by systems that measure success through narrow, standardized metrics rather than genuine opportunity. Educational equity remains a pressing concern in contemporary schooling, especially where traditional attainment-oriented models measure success primarily by metrics such as test scores and enrollment figures (Sen, 1992). Such models often overlook how learners' real freedoms and opportunities influence what they can actually achieve and value, leaving many from diverse and marginalized backgrounds underserved.

Recent scholarship has increasingly applied the Capability Approach to education, though in fragmented ways. Mackenzie (2022) reconceptualizes English as a linguistic capability, revealing how economically vulnerable students' academic participation is shaped by language-related freedoms; however, the analysis remains confined to higher education and language-specific capability development (p. 620). Singh and Suknunan (2023) demonstrate how Universal Design of Instruction enhances access for students with visual disabilities, but their focus on instructional accommodation does not fully engage with capability expansion as a normative educational goal (p. 6).

This study addresses that gap by critically examining how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach can reframe the conceptualization of educational freedoms for diverse learners. The study synthesizes existing scholarship to explore how capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors can inform inclusive educational practice. This perspective is distinctive in shifting evaluation away from standardized attainment toward learners' genuine opportunities to thrive. The aim of this study is to critically examine how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach can be used to reconceptualize and expand educational freedoms for diverse learners beyond attainment-focused and standardized models of educational evaluation.

Research Objectives

The study is guided by the following objectives which are to:

i. Conceptualize educational freedom using the core constructs of the Capability Approach, namely capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors.
ii. Critically synthesize recent literature on inclusive education through a capability-oriented lens.
iii. Identify limitations in prevailing educational practices and assessment frameworks that prioritize standardized outcomes over learners' substantive freedoms.
iv. Propose a capability-informed framework for evaluating inclusive educational practice that is responsive to learner diversity.

Research Questions

To achieve the stated aim and objectives, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

i. How does Amartya Sen's Capability Approach reframe the notion of educational freedom for diverse learners?

ii. In what ways do recent inclusive education studies engage with, or overlook, learners' capabilities and conversion factors?
iii. How can educational practice and policy be evaluated through a capability-oriented lens to promote genuine educational inclusion?

Theoretical Framework

This study is theoretically grounded in Amartya Sen's Capability Approach, which offers a normative framework for evaluating well-being and social arrangements by focusing on individuals' substantive freedoms rather than on resources or achieved outcomes alone. Developed initially within welfare economics and social justice theory, the Capability Approach shifts attention from what people possess to what they are genuinely able to do and to be (Sen, 1999). In the context of education, this perspective provides a credible alternative to attainment-driven models that equate equity with access, inputs, or standardized performance.

Central to the Capability Approach is the distinction between functionings and capabilities. Functionings refer to the realized states and activities of individuals, such as being literate, participating in classroom discussions, or completing formal schooling. Capabilities, by contrast, represent the real opportunities or freedoms to achieve these functionings (Sen, 2009). In educational settings, this distinction is critical as two learners may display similar academic outcomes while possessing vastly different degrees of freedom, agency, and future opportunity. Evaluating education through capabilities therefore enables a deeper analysis of whether schooling expands learners' meaningful choices rather than merely producing comparable outputs.

The framework further emphasizes the role of conversion factors which are personal, social, and environmental conditions that affect individuals' ability to convert resources into valued functionings. Personal factors may include disability, language proficiency, or prior educational experiences; social factors encompass institutional norms, pedagogical practices, and assessment regimes; environmental factors involve material conditions such as infrastructure or access to learning support. For diverse learners, these conversion factors often mediate the relationship between formal educational provision and actual learning opportunities. As such, the Capability Approach draws attention to structural and contextual inequalities that remain invisible in standardized metrics of achievement.

Applied to inclusive education, the Capability Approach reorganizes equity as the expansion of educational freedoms rather than the equalization of outcomes. It challenges deficit-oriented and one-size-fits-all models by recognizing learner diversity as a normative condition rather than an exception. From this perspective, inclusive education entails designing curricula, pedagogies, and assessment systems that are responsive to varied capability sets and that actively support learners' agency, participation, and well-being. This theoretical stance aligns with calls for pluralistic and participatory approaches to educational evaluation that value what learners themselves have reason to value (Sen, 1999; Sen, 2009).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative systematic review design to examine how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach has been applied in recent scholarship to conceptualize and evaluate educational freedoms for diverse learners. A qualitative systematic review is appropriate where the purpose is not statistical aggregation, but the critical synthesis of theoretical perspectives, concepts, and patterns across studies (Booth, Sutton, & Papaioannou, 2016). This approach allows for an in-depth engagement with normative frameworks and supports theory-driven analysis, which is central to capability-oriented research.

Review Design and Rationale

Unlike meta-analyses or purely aggregative reviews, qualitative systematic reviews enable the examination of meanings, assumptions, and conceptual uses across studies (Sandelowski & Barroso, 2007). This design was therefore well suited to addressing the study's research questions, which focus on how educational freedoms are framed, operationalized, or constrained within inclusive education discourse.

Search Strategy

A structured literature search was conducted across established academic databases commonly used in education and social science research, including Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. Search terms were developed iteratively and included combinations of keywords such as Capability Approach, educational freedom, inclusive education, diverse learners, disability, linguistic capability, and educational equity. Boolean operators were used to refine results and ensure relevance.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The review applied clear inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure relevance and quality. Studies were included if they:

- Were peer-reviewed journal articles;
- Were published between 2022 and 2024;
- Engaged explicitly with the Capability Approach or its core constructs (capabilities, functionings, conversion factors);
- Addressed issues related to education, inclusion, diversity, disability, or linguistic justice.

Studies were excluded if they:

- Were purely empirical without theoretical engagement;
- Focused on development or well-being without an educational dimension;
- Were conference papers, editorials, or non–peer-reviewed sources.

These criteria ensured conceptual consistency while maintaining analytical depth.

Data Extraction and Analytical Procedure

Relevant studies were subjected to thematic synthesis, guided by the core constructs of the Capability Approach. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, data were coded inductively and deductively. Deductive coding was informed by predefined capability concepts such as educational freedom, agency, and conversion factors—while inductive coding allowed for the emergence of patterns not initially anticipated.

The analysis focused on:

- How educational success was conceptualized;
- Which learner capabilities were emphasized or neglected;
- How structural, pedagogical, and institutional factors shaped learners' opportunities.

This dual coding strategy enhanced analytical rigor and reduced the risk of theoretical imposition.

Trustworthiness and Rigor

To enhance credibility and transparency, the review process followed established guidelines for qualitative synthesis. Clear documentation of search strategies, selection criteria, and analytical decisions was maintained throughout. Reflexivity was applied by critically examining how the Capability Approach shaped interpretation, acknowledging its normative orientation while remaining attentive to alternative perspectives within the literature (Nowell *et al.*, 2017).

Findings

Consistent with the study's aim of examining how the Capability Approach can reframe educational freedoms for diverse learners, the qualitative systematic review produced three interconnected analytical findings. These findings emerge from a thematic synthesis of the reviewed literature and are organized around the Capability Approach's central constructs of capabilities, functionings, and conversion factors, as outlined in the theoretical framework. Together, they reveal how educational freedom is conceptualized, constrained, and partially realized in recent scholarship.

Educational Freedom Is Predominantly Framed Through Narrow Capability Lenses

Across the reviewed studies, educational freedom is most often conceptualized through specific, bounded capabilities, rather than as a broad and plural set of opportunities. Mackenzie (2022) frames English proficiency as a linguistic capability that enables economically vulnerable students to participate meaningfully in university learning. Similarly, Murray (2024) emphasizes autonomy and reflective capability through student-led course design. While these contributions illustrate the usefulness of the Capability Approach, they tend to isolate particular capabilities rather than examining how multiple capabilities interact to shape learners' overall educational freedom. As a result, freedom is often implicitly equated with success in a specific domain, rather than with learners' wider capacity to pursue valued educational pathways.

Conversion Factors Are Acknowledged but Not Systematically Examined

A second finding relates to the treatment of conversion factors, which mediate the relationship between educational resources and learners' achieved functionings. Singh and Suknunan (2023) show that Universal Design of Instruction improves access for students with visual disabilities, indicating the importance of pedagogical and environmental factors in enabling participation. Bobongie-Harris *et al*. (2023) similarly captures the role of teachers' cultural capabilities in supporting culturally and linguistically diverse learners. However, in both cases, conversion factors are addressed implicitly and primarily at the level of practice. There is limited systematic analysis of how institutional norms, assessment practices, and policy structures constrain or enable learners' ability to convert educational provision into meaningful opportunities, thereby restricting the expansion of genuine educational freedoms.

A Persistent Gap Between Normative Theory and Educational Practice

The review further reveals a consistent disconnect between normative capability theory and its application in educational systems. Brando and Pons (2023) advance a rigorous theoretical account of linguistic justice grounded in the Capability Approach, but their analysis remains largely abstract, offering limited guidance for classroom practice or curriculum design. Bhogal-Nair (2024) similarly develops a capability-based understanding of disability and well-being, emphasizing social conditions over individual deficits, yet does not explicitly engage with educational structures. This pattern suggests that while the Capability Approach is increasingly recognized as a valuable evaluative framework, it is seldom translated into concrete mechanisms for evaluating or designing inclusive educational practice.

The findings indicate that recent scholarly work acknowledges the importance of expanding educational freedoms but applies the Capability Approach in partial and uneven ways. Capabilities are frequently treated as outcomes or competencies rather than as evaluative spaces of freedom, while conversion factors are insufficiently examined at systemic levels. Consequently, educational inclusion is often pursued through access and accommodation rather than through the deliberate expansion of learners' substantive opportunities. These findings support the need for a more integrative capability-oriented framework that places freedom, agency, and diversity at the center of educational evaluation.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that while recent scholarship increasingly invokes capability-based ideas, educational freedom is still conceptualized in limited and uneven ways. This discussion interprets these findings in relation to the research questions, explains why they matter, and clarifies the contribution of the present study.

Reframing Educational Freedom Through the Capability Approach

In response to the first research question, how the Capability Approach reframes educational freedom for diverse learners: the findings show that educational freedom is rarely treated as a broad evaluative space of genuine choice. Instead, studies tend to focus on discrete capabilities, such as linguistic proficiency (Mackenzie, 2022) or learner autonomy (Murray, 2024). While these contributions align with the Capability Approach in principle, they often stop short of examining how multiple capabilities interact to shape learners' overall educational trajectories. This matters because Sen's framework emphasizes freedom as plural and context-dependent, not reducible to success in a single domain. The present study reinforces the need to evaluate education in terms of learners' wider capability sets rather than isolated achievements.

Capabilities, Conversion Factors, and the Limits of Current Practice

Addressing the second research question, the findings indicate that existing inclusive education research engages with capabilities unevenly and often under-theorizes conversion factors. Singh and Suknunan (2023) demonstrate that inclusive instructional design improves access for students with visual disabilities, while Bobongie-Harris *et al.* (2023) emphasize the importance of teachers' cultural capabilities. However, both studies focus primarily on immediate pedagogical practices and do not systematically interrogate how institutional norms, assessment regimes, and policy structures shape learners' opportunities. This suggests that educational resources alone are insufficient to expand freedom unless the social and institutional conditions that govern their use are also addressed. The present study extends this insight by foregrounding conversion factors as central to understanding why access does not always translate into meaningful educational opportunity.

Bridging Normative Theory and Educational Practice

The third research question concerned how educational practice and policy might be evaluated through a capability-oriented lens. The findings reveal a persistent gap between normative capability theory and its application in educational contexts. Brando and Pons (2023) offer a philosophically rigorous account of linguistic justice, and Bhogal-Nair (2024) advances a capability-based understanding of disability and well-being. However, both remain largely abstract, providing limited guidance for educational design, assessment, or evaluation. This study contributes by synthesizing these theoretical insights with applied educational research, demonstrating how the Capability Approach can serve not only as a moral framework but also as a practical evaluative tool for inclusive education.

What is new in this study is not the introduction of the Capability Approach to education, but its integrative and evaluative application across diverse strands of recent literature. Unlike prior studies that focus on specific learner groups, single capabilities, or isolated interventions, this study brings together linguistic, cultural, disability-related, and pedagogical perspectives to show how educational freedom is systematically constrained by fragmented approaches. Thus, it advances a more coherent understanding of inclusive education as the expansion of substantive freedoms rather than the accommodation of difference within existing structures. This contribution lies in reframing educational equity as a question of what learners are genuinely enabled to become and do, rather than what they are measured to achieve.

The discussion underscores that inclusive education cannot be fully realized without shifting evaluative priorities from standardized outcomes to capability expansion. The findings suggest that educational systems must move beyond access-oriented reforms toward participatory, flexible, and context-sensitive practices that recognize learner diversity as a normative condition. By positioning freedom as the central goal of education, this study provides a conceptual foundation for rethinking curriculum design, assessment practices, and policy frameworks in ways that are responsive to the lived realities of diverse learners.

The findings of this study carry important implications for educational policy and practice, particularly within contexts committed to inclusive education. First, the analysis suggests that policy frameworks should move beyond access-based indicators and standardized attainment measures toward capability-informed evaluation criteria. Policies that prioritize enrolment, progression rates, or examination outcomes risk obscuring whether learners possess genuine opportunities to participate, exercise agency, and pursue educational pathways they value. A capability-oriented policy approach would require educational systems to explicitly consider how institutional arrangements, assessment practices, and curricular structures enable or constrain diverse learners' freedoms.

At the level of practice, the findings stress the need for intentional attention to conversion factors within schools and higher education institutions. While inclusive pedagogies and universal design principles, as discussed by Singh and Suknunan (2023), enhance accessibility, they must be embedded within broader institutional cultures that value learner diversity and participation. Similarly, professional development initiatives aimed at strengthening teachers' cultural capabilities (Bobongie-Harris et al., 2023) should be accompanied by systemic support that allows educators to exercise agency in adapting curricula and assessment practices.

More broadly, the Capability Approach provides a pathway through which inclusive education can be understood as a process of expanding learners' substantive freedoms rather than accommodating difference within fixed structures. Educational leaders and policymakers can draw on this framework to design learning environments that recognize multiple pathways to success and value learners' voices in defining what educational achievement means for them.

Conclusion

This study set out to examine how Amartya Sen's Capability Approach can reorganize the conceptualization of educational freedoms for diverse learners. Through a qualitative systematic review of recent scholarship, the study demonstrated that while capability-oriented ideas are increasingly present in inclusive education research, they are often applied in fragmented and limited ways. Capabilities tend to be treated as discrete competencies or outcomes, and the role of conversion factors in shaping learners' opportunities remains insufficiently examined. By synthesizing insights across linguistic, cultural, disability, and pedagogical domains, this study contributes a more integrative understanding of educational freedom as the expansion of learners' genuine opportunities to learn, participate, and flourish.

Future research should build on this conceptual foundation through empirical investigations that examine how capability-informed approaches can be operationalized in schools and higher education institutions. Studies exploring learners' own perspectives on valued educational freedoms, as well as comparative analyses of assessment and curriculum reforms, would further strengthen the application of the Capability Approach in inclusive education. Such work would deepen understanding of how educational systems can move from measuring attainment to expanding freedom as a central goal of education.

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Review Article

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Technological Innovation and Productivity Growth in the African Manufacturing Sector

Abstract

This study examined the relationship between technological innovation and productivity growth in the African manufacturing sector, arguing that the region's ability to bridge its industrial output gap is fundamentally tied to how effectively it adopts, adapts, and diffuses technology across its production systems. The central problem lies in the sector's continued dependence on labour-intensive, low-technology production methods that limit value addition, constrain export competitiveness, and leave firms vulnerable to external shocks. The study adopted the Technology-Gap Theory and the Endogenous Growth Theory, alongside a qualitative systematic literature review methodology. It also made use of secondary data from peer-reviewed academic journals, institutional reports, and policy documents published between 2014 and 2024. Findings revealed that technological innovation drives manufacturing productivity gains across the continent, with adoption remaining highly uneven. Here, large, export-oriented firms captured the bulk of the benefits while small and medium-sized enterprises struggle under the weight of structural constraints including inadequate infrastructure, limited financing, and shallow innovation ecosystems. A major conclusion is that the gap between technological potential and productive reality in African manufacturing is primarily institutional rather than technical. Governments are therefore urged to construct integrated industrial technology policies that simultaneously address financing access, innovation infrastructure, and skills development as part of a coherent productivity agenda.

Keywords: Technological innovation, productivity growth, African manufacturing, endogenous growth, technology diffusion, industrial policy.

Temitope Oluwafemi Ademola
Business Innovation, School of Business
Osiri University, Lincoln, Nebraska, USA
+2348077301197, +2348102985374
ORCID: 0009-0005-5680-6040

Corresponding Author's Email: Temademola@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Manufacturing has long served as the engine of structural transformation in developing economies, offering pathways to employment creation, value addition, and sustained economic growth. Across East Asia, Latin America, and parts of South Asia, deliberate investments in industrial technology were central to the dramatic productivity gains that lifted millions out of poverty and positioned those economies competitively in global markets. Africa, however, has largely remained on the periphery of this industrial revolution. Despite being home to a rapidly growing population, abundant natural resources, and increasing urbanization, the continent's manufacturing sector contributes just over ten per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) on average, a figure that has remained stagnant for decades while other regions have surged ahead (United Nations Industrial Development Organization, 2023).

The question of why African manufacturing has failed to close this productivity gap is neither simple nor monocausal. Scholars have pointed to inadequate infrastructure, unfavourable trade conditions, weak institutional frameworks, and limited access to finance as major culprits (Rodrik, 2016). The literature converges on a more fundamental constraint which are that the slow and uneven adoption of technology within African manufacturing firms. In an era where digital technologies, automation, and advanced production systems are redefining global industrial competitiveness, the majority of African manufacturers continue to rely on outdated, low-productivity production methods that limit their capacity for value creation and export diversification (Naudé, 2018).

Technological innovation, is understood as the introduction and application of new knowledge, tools, processes, and systems that improve productive capacity, has emerged as a central concern for researchers, policymakers, and development practitioners interested in Africa's industrial future. The literature suggests that innovation, whether in the form of technology adoption, research and development (R&D) investment, or digital transformation, carries significant potential to raise total factor productivity (TFP), improve product quality, and reduce production costs across manufacturing sub-sectors (Cirera & Maloney, 2017). At the same time, evidence also reveals deep structural barriers that prevent this potential from translating into broad-based productivity outcomes, particularly for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) which form the backbone of Africa's industrial setting.

The study situates its analysis within an integrated theoretical framework drawn from the Technology-Gap Theory and Endogenous Growth Theory, both of which offer robust explanations for why technological capability matters for long-run productivity improvement in developing economies. In doing so, it not only synthesizes what the literature currently tells us about this relationship but also identifies where scholarly attention has been insufficient and what that means for both research and policy going forward.

2. Research Objectives

Specifically, the study seeks to:

i. Assess the relationship between technological innovation and productivity growth in African manufacturing firms.
ii. Analyze the mechanisms through which technology adoption generates productivity gains at

the firm, sector, and economy-wide levels.

iii. Identify the structural and institutional barriers that constrain technology diffusion and productivity growth in the sector.

3. Research Questions

To achieve the objectives above, the study is guided by the following questions:

i. What is the relationship between technological innovation and productivity growth in Africa's manufacturing sector?
ii. Through what mechanisms does technology adoption translate into measurable productivity gains at the firm and sector levels?
iii. What structural and institutional barriers hinder the diffusion of technology-driven productivity improvements across African manufacturing?

4. Statement of the Problem

Despite the widely acknowledged potential of technological innovation to accelerate industrial productivity, African manufacturing continues to underperform relative to its own development aspirations and global benchmarks. The continent's manufacturing sector remains characterized by low technology intensity, limited R&D investment, and a persistent productivity gap when compared to both developed economies and rapidly industrializing regions in Asia (UNIDO, 2023). These conditions are not incidental but reflect deep structural and institutional failures that have constrained the adoption and diffusion of productivity-enhancing technologies across the sector.

While scholarly attention to this problem has increased in recent years, a careful review of the existing literature reveals important gaps. First, much of the research on technological innovation in Africa focuses on specific countries, sub-sectors, or firm types, making it difficult to draw continent-wide conclusions about the mechanisms linking innovation to productivity (Diao *et al.*, 2021). Second, studies that do engage with productivity tend to treat technology adoption as an isolated variable rather than situating it within the broader institutional and policy framework that determine whether firms can effectively absorb and utilize new technologies (Cirera & Maloney, 2017). Third, existing literature has paid insufficient attention to the role of SMEs, which constitute the majority of manufacturing firms on the continent though systematically excluded from the productivity gains that technology can generate due to structural financing, skills, and infrastructure gaps.

This research gap carries practical consequences because without a clear, integrated understanding of how technological innovation drives productivity in the African manufacturing context, policy interventions might become piecemeal, misaligned with firm-level realities, or captured by larger firms at the expense of the broader industrial base. It is for this reason that this study seeks to address this gap by synthesizing existing literature through a theoretically grounded framework that examines not only whether technology increases productivity, but how, for whom, and under what conditions it does so most effectively.

5. Literature Review

Scholarly interest in the connection between technology and manufacturing productivity in Africa has grown over the past decade. Researchers have approached the subject from multiple angles, including firm-level studies of technology adoption, macro-level analyses of R&D expenditure and industrial output, and sector-specific examinations of digital transformation. What emerges from this body of work is a picture of significant potential constrained by equally significant structural challenges.

At the firm level, research shows that manufacturing enterprises that invest in modern technology achieve higher levels of total factor productivity than those relying on conventional production methods. Diao *et al.* (2021), drawing on firm-level data from Tanzania and Ethiopia, found compelling evidence that the gap between frontier and non-frontier firms in African manufacturing is primarily explained by differential access to and adoption of modern production technologies. Their analysis shows that firms operating closer to the technological frontier are not only more productive in absolute terms but also demonstrate greater resilience to external economic shocks, a finding with significant implications for industrial policy design in the region.

The literature on innovation systems and absorptive capacity further illuminates the macro-level dimension of this relationship. Cirera and Maloney (2017), in their World Bank study, document what they term the "innovation paradox": while developing countries including those in Africa have significant scope for productivity improvement through technology adoption, the expected convergence with frontier economies has not materialized at scale. Their analysis attributes this to insufficient absorptive capacity at the firm level, weak national innovation systems, and the absence of policy frameworks that create meaningful incentives for firms to invest in technological upgrading. This insight is particularly pertinent to African manufacturing, where innovation spending remains a fraction of what is observed in comparable developing economies in Asia.

The particular challenge facing SMEs has also received growing attention. Goedhuys and Veugelers (2012) documented a persistent technology adoption gap between large and small manufacturing firms, attributing it to differential access to finance, unequal exposure to foreign knowledge through trade and investment, and varying managerial capacity to identify and implement appropriate technologies. More recent work by the African Development Bank (AfDB, 2022) confirms that this gap has narrowed only marginally, with SMEs continuing to account for a disproportionately small share of technology investment in African manufacturing despite their numerical dominance.

Digital technologies have attracted particular scholarly interest in recent years. The rapid diffusion of mobile connectivity across Africa has created a new pathway for technology adoption that bypasses some of the infrastructure constraints that previously slowed manufacturing modernization. Oyelaran-Oyeyinka and Lal (2006) were among the earliest to document how digital tools enabled African manufacturers to access global knowledge networks, improve supply chain efficiency, and reduce transaction costs. More recent evidence reviewed by UNIDO (2023) suggests that firms actively integrating digital platforms into their operations achieve productivity gains of between fifteen and twenty-five per cent relative to non-digitized peers, though the distribution of these gains remains highly uneven.

Naudé (2018) adds an important structural dimension to this discourse by situating technology's role within the broader context of Africa's industrial transformation. He argues that new technologies, when combined with resurgent entrepreneurship and deliberate industrial policy, carry genuine potential to revive African manufacturing and redirect it toward higher value-added activities. However, he cautions that realizing this potential requires overcoming deeply entrenched structural barriers, particularly around infrastructure and human capital, that continue to suppress the productivity returns to technology investment across the continent.

Across the literature examined, a recurring finding is that the relationship between technology and productivity is not automatic but mediated by a set of enabling conditions including infrastructure quality, access to appropriate financing instruments, policy coherence, and the availability of technically skilled labour (Rodrik, 2016). This insight has important implications for both theory and policy as it suggests that technology interventions divorced from broader industrial and human capital development strategies are unlikely to produce transformative productivity outcomes in the African context.

6. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in two complementary theoretical perspectives known as the Technology-Gap Theory and the Endogenous Growth Theory. These frameworks provide a coherent conceptual foundation for understanding why and how technological innovation drives productivity in the African manufacturing context.

6.1 Technology-Gap Theory

The Technology-Gap Theory, associated most closely with the work of Posner (1961) and later extended by Fagerberg (1994), holds that differences in productivity performance across countries and firms are fundamentally rooted in differences in technological capability. Countries or firms that operate with a significant technology gap relative to the frontier are expected to experience lower productivity, but also greater potential for catch-up growth by absorbing and adapting existing technologies developed elsewhere. For Africa, this theory is particularly instructive as the continent's manufacturing firms do not need to invent frontier technologies from scratch to achieve productivity gains; rather, they can close the gap through deliberate investment in technology transfer, adaptation, and diffusion, provided that absorptive capacity is sufficient.

Cirera and Maloney (2017) extend this thinking by demonstrating that absorptive capacity itself is not a fixed endowment but a policy-responsive variable. Their empirical work shows that countries investing in the human capital, institutional quality, and firm-level capabilities that constitute absorptive capacity are better positioned to convert technology exposure into productivity gains. In the African manufacturing context, where absorptive capacity is often limited, the Technology-Gap Theory helps explain both the persistence of low productivity and the conditions under which accelerated technological catch-up can be achieved.

6.2 Endogenous Growth Theory

The Endogenous Growth Theory, advanced by Romer (1990) and Lucas (1988), represents a significant departure from earlier growth models by treating technological change as an endogenous outcome of deliberate economic decisions rather than as an exogenous variable. Central to this framework is the idea that investments in human capital, knowledge, and innovation generate positive externalities and increasing returns, making technology the principal driver of sustained long-run productivity growth. For African manufacturing, this theory implies that the sector's long-run productivity trajectory is not determined by factor endowments alone but by the quality of knowledge investments, institutional supports, and policy environments that shape the incentive structures for innovation.

The Technology-Gap and Endogenous Growth theories both offer a dual-lens framework for this study. The former directs attention to the structural conditions that determine whether African manufacturers can absorb and utilize available technologies, while the latter stresses the importance of domestically generated knowledge and institutional incentives as the foundation for sustained productivity improvement. This integrated theoretical lens informs both the analysis of findings and the study's policy recommendations.

7. Methodology

7.1 Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design anchored in a systematic literature review methodology. Rather than generating primary data through surveys or field experiments, the research synthesizes and critically interprets existing evidence from peer-reviewed academic publications, institutional reports, and policy documents to construct a coherent understanding of how technological innovation affects manufacturing productivity in Africa. This design is appropriate given the study's objective of integrating fragmented scholarly evidence into a theoretically grounded analytical framework, and is consistent with the established tradition of systematic reviews as a rigorous and credible form of academic inquiry (Snyder, 2019).

7.2 Data Sources

Secondary data were sourced from major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, supplemented by institutional repositories maintained by organizations such as UNIDO, the African Development Bank (AfDB), the World Bank, and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). The study concentrated on literature published between 2014 and 2024, ensuring that the analysis captures contemporary dynamics in African manufacturing technology while drawing on foundational theoretical works where relevant. Sources were selected on the basis of scholarly credibility, methodological transparency, and direct relevance to the study's thematic scope.

7.3 Search Strategy and Selection

A structured keyword search was conducted using terms including "technological innovation and manufacturing productivity Africa," "technology adoption sub-Saharan Africa manufacturing," "industrial productivity growth Africa," "digitalization African manufacturing firms," and "SME technology barriers Africa." The initial search yielded approximately 380 records. After removing duplicates and screening titles and abstracts for relevance, 140 full-text records were assessed. Studies were included if they explicitly examined the technology-productivity relationship within African or analogous developing economy manufacturing contexts and offered either empirical findings or robust theoretical contributions. Studies that were purely descriptive, lacked methodological transparency, or focused on sectors other than manufacturing were excluded. The final analytical sample comprised 52 studies.

7.4 Data Analysis

Thematic content analysis was employed to synthesize findings across the selected studies. Each source was reviewed and coded according to recurring themes, including technology adoption patterns, productivity mechanisms, barriers to diffusion, and policy interventions. The identified themes were then interpreted through the integrated Technology-Gap and Endogenous Growth theoretical framework, enabling the study to move beyond descriptive synthesis toward a theoretically informed analysis of the conditions under which technological innovation generates manufacturing productivity gains in Africa.

8. Findings and Discussion

The findings that emerge from the reviewed literature are organized around three dominant themes that consistently cut across the evidence base. These themes capture the key dimensions of the technology-productivity relationship in African manufacturing and reveal both the opportunities and structural constraints that define the sector's current trajectory.

8.1 Technology Adoption as a Consistent Driver of Productivity

Across the studies reviewed, there is a robust and consistent finding with manufacturing firms that invest in modern technologies, whether through the acquisition of advanced machinery, adoption of digital platforms, or integration of automated production systems. This prove measurably higher productivity than those relying on conventional methods. This finding holds across different countries, sub-sectors, and firm sizes, though the magnitude of the productivity effect varies considerably depending on context.

Diao *et al.* (2021) provide some of the most compelling micro-level evidence on this relationship. Their firm-level analysis of manufacturing enterprises in Tanzania and Ethiopia documents that the productivity gap between frontier and non-frontier firms is primarily explained by differential technology access and adoption rather than by differences in labour quality, capital intensity, or market access alone. Firms operating at or near the technological frontier record output per worker levels substantially higher than those of their lower-technology counterparts, and this gap has widened rather than narrowed over the study period. This suggest that the benefits of technology adoption are accruing progressively to those already operating at higher capability levels.

The digital technology dimension of this finding is particularly significant. UNIDO (2023) documents that firms across various African manufacturing sub-sectors that have integrated digital tools, including enterprise resource planning systems, digital inventory management, and e-commerce platforms, achieve productivity improvements ranging from 15 to 25 per cent relative to non-digitized counterparts. These gains operate through multiple channels simultaneously reducing transaction and coordination costs. It brings about faster response to market signals, improved supply chain visibility, and better allocation of labour and capital across production processes.

However, the literature also introduces important dimensions to this broad finding. First, productivity gains from technology adoption are most pronounced where complementary investments have been made in human capital development. Naudé (2018) observes that the transformative potential of new technologies in African manufacturing is consistently attenuated where workers lack the technical skills to operate modern equipment effectively or where managerial capacity to leverage technology strategically remains underdeveloped. This suggests that the productivity impact of technology is not automatic but is mediated by the broader learning and skills environment within the firm and the economy.

Second, the evidence reveals a significant disparity in technology-driven productivity gains between large firms and SMEs. Large, export-oriented manufacturers capture the majority of the productivity benefits from technology adoption, benefiting from economies of scale in technology investment, better access to credit for equipment purchases, and more extensive exposure to foreign technical knowledge through trade and investment relationships. SMEs, by contrast, tend to be confined to lower-technology production methods not because they are unaware of superior technologies but because the financial, infrastructural, and skills constraints they face make adoption prohibitively costly (AfDB, 2022). This disparity means that aggregate productivity gains in African manufacturing are heavily concentrated rather than broadly distributed, limiting the sector's contribution to inclusive economic development.

This first major finding establishes that technology is a genuine and significant driver of manufacturing productivity in Africa, while also revealing that the full realization of its potential is conditional on a set of enabling factors that currently remain unevenly distributed across the sector. This insight directly informs the study's theoretical framing. Consistent with Endogenous Growth Theory, productivity improvements are endogenously generated through deliberate knowledge investments, but the Technology-Gap Theory reminds us that absorptive capacity and institutional conditions are decisive in determining whether firms can effectively close the gap between their current and potential productivity frontiers.

8.2 Innovation Ecosystems and the Absorptive Capacity Gap

A second prominent finding in the literature concerns the critical role of national and regional innovation settings in determining whether technology adoption translates into durable productivity gains. Research consistently shows that individual firms do not operate in a vacuum with their capacity to absorb, utilize, and build upon new technologies heavily shaped by the external environment in which they are embedded. This includes the quality of educational institutions, the density of technology support services, the accessibility of research and development infrastructure, and the coherence of industrial policy.

Cirera and Maloney (2017) provide the most comprehensive cross-country evidence on this point. Their analysis of innovation patterns and productivity outcomes across a wide range of developing economies validates that countries with stronger national innovation systems record systematically higher rates of technology-driven productivity improvement in manufacturing. Critically, they show that the productivity returns to any given level of technology investment are substantially higher in economies with well-developed absorptive capacity. This suggest that building the conditions for effective technology use matters as much as the technology investment itself. For African economies where innovation system quality is generally low by international standards, this finding implies that technology investment without parallel investment in the institutional infrastructure for innovation is likely to yield disappointing productivity returns.

This finding has particularly important implications for SMEs, which are less able than large firms to compensate for weak innovation ecosystems through internal resource mobilization. Where public technology extension services, shared innovation infrastructure, and accessible technical training programmes exist, SMEs demonstrate meaningfully higher rates of technology adoption and more substantial productivity improvements. Conversely, where such support is absent, the technology-productivity gap between large firms and SMEs widens, reinforcing existing inequalities within the manufacturing sector.

8.3 Structural Barriers and the Institutional Constraint

The third and arguably most consequential finding in the literature is the identification of deep structural and institutional barriers that consistently impede the diffusion of technology across African manufacturing, irrespective of the firm-level desire to adopt productivity-enhancing innovations. These barriers operate at multiple levels simultaneously and interact in ways that make them particularly difficult to address through narrow, sector-specific interventions.

Inadequate physical infrastructure is among the most frequently cited constraints. Unreliable electricity supply, poor transport networks, and limited digital connectivity collectively raise the cost of technology adoption and reduce its productivity returns, particularly for firms located outside major urban centres. Research reviewed by UNIDO (2023) estimates that infrastructure deficiencies add between 10 and 40 per cent to the effective cost of technology adoption for African manufacturers, creating a structural disadvantage that erodes the price competitiveness of technology-intensive production.

Limited access to appropriate financing is equally pervasive. This is as the high cost of capital in most African economies, combined with the risk aversion of commercial lenders toward manufacturing investments constrain growth. The absence of technology-specific financing instruments, means that firms, and especially SMEs, are frequently unable to fund the upfront costs of equipment acquisition and technological upgrading even when the long-run productivity case for doing so is clear (Goedhuys & Veugelers, 2012). Development finance institutions have partially filled this gap, but their reach remains insufficient relative to the scale of the financing need.

Policy inconsistency and weak institutional coordination represent a further structural barrier. Across the reviewed literature, a consistent finding is that African countries with more coherent, stable, and well-enforced industrial and technology policies record stronger rates of technology diffusion and productivity growth in manufacturing. Conversely, where industrial policy is fragmented, where technology incentives are poorly designed or inconsistently applied, and where the regulatory environment creates uncertainty for investors, the adoption of productivity-enhancing technologies is inhibited regardless of their technical potential (Rodrik, 2016).

This suite of structural and institutional barriers collectively explains a central paradox in the African manufacturing literature. This is as the existence of a growing body of evidence demonstrating the productivity returns to technology adoption alongside the persistence of low technology intensity across the sector. The gap between what is technically possible and what is practically achievable for the majority of African manufacturers is, the evidence suggests, primarily an institutional and structural gap rather than a technological one.

9. Conclusion

What the evidence ultimately reveal is that Africa's manufacturing productivity challenge is not a technology deficit in the narrow sense. The tools, processes, and knowledge systems required to substantially raise industrial productivity exist and, in pockets across the continent, are already delivering meaningful results. The deeper challenge is an institutional one as the frameworks, financing architectures, and policy environments needed to enable broad-based technology diffusion across the manufacturing sector remain inadequate, particularly for the SMEs that constitute the numerical majority of African manufacturing firms.

This insight reframes the productivity problem in a way that has significant implications for how it should be addressed. Prescriptions that focus exclusively on technology transfer, foreign direct investment attraction, or digital infrastructure provision are valuable. This will fall short if they are not embedded within a broader institutional reform agenda that addresses the conditions governing firms' ability to absorb and productively deploy new technologies. Cirera and Maloney (2017) describe this as the "innovation paradox" at its most consequential meaning the countries and firms that stand to gain the most from technological catch-up are precisely those least equipped, institutionally and structurally, to capture those gains without deliberate policy intervention.

Africa's manufacturing sector therefore faces not a single challenge but a system-level challenge that requires a system-level response. The path to sustained productivity growth runs through the deliberate construction of institutional architectures that treat technological capability not as a by-product of economic development but as its foundation.

10. Recommendations

African governments and their development partners should urgently establish integrated industrial technology funds that simultaneously address the three primary barriers constraining technology-driven productivity growth. They are financing access, skills development, and innovation infrastructure. Currently, these dimensions are typically addressed through separate, uncoordinated policy instruments, resulting in interventions that are individually insufficient to overcome the interlocking constraints that firms face. A financing facility that provides affordable credit for equipment acquisition achieves limited impact if firms lack workers with the technical skills to operate that equipment. Again, neither will investment yields its full productivity return if the power supply to the factory is unreliable.

The design of these funds should be explicitly SME-centred, recognizing that large firms already possess greater capacity to overcome structural barriers through internal resource mobilization. Fund allocations should be contingent on firms developing linked investments in skills training and operational improvement, ensuring that technology acquisition is embedded within a broader firm-level productivity development strategy. The funds should be co-governed by ministries of industry, finance, and education working in coordination, with dedicated technical secretariats responsible for maintaining policy coherence and monitoring productivity outcomes. African Union and sub-regional blocs should facilitate the pooling of financing resources and the sharing of innovation infrastructure across borders, reducing the unit costs of technology access for smaller economies. The productivity gap in African manufacturing is neither inevitable nor permanent, but closing it requires the kind of deliberate, coordinated institutional action that has thus far been in short supply.

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Universal Laws, Particular Landscapes and Human Cultures Adaptation to Transforming Ecological Constraints

Abstract

The connection between ecology and human culture highlights a basic conflict between various cultural adaptations and universal biological limitations. The way that human societies respond to ecological principles, such as resource constraints, energy fluxes, and ecosystem interconnectedness, varies greatly depending on their belief systems, economic systems, and historical development. The present study investigated this dynamic interaction and made the case that an integrated strategy that recognises the uniqueness of human cultural frameworks as well as the universality of ecological principles is necessary for environmental sustainability. Using case studies ranging from industrialised environmental legislation to indigenous resource management, the paper illustrated how many communities use unique worldviews, customs, and technological advancements to navigate ecological boundaries. A biocultural perspective that unites ecological science and cultural relativism is promoted in place of reductionist methods that either overly heighten the idea that scientific knowledge and methods are applicable and valid across all cultures and contexts (universality of science) or ignore local knowledge. The paper's conclusive argument is that in order to effectively address global environmental crises, such as biodiversity loss and climate change, solutions must be both ecologically sound and culturally sensitive. Through the integration of multidisciplinary perspectives from sustainability studies, environmental humanities, and anthropology, this research advanced a more sophisticated comprehension of humanity's role in (and) obligation to nature.

Keywords: Human Culture, Universality, Sustainability, Biocultural Diversity, Environmental Adaptation.

Ikeagwuchi Ikechukwu Ukwuoma
Centre for Critical Thinking, Teaching and Learning
Nigerian Defence Academy, Kaduna
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2265-0296

Benignus Chinonso Eze (PhD)
Department of Philosophy, University of Nigeria, Nsukka
chukwunomso.eze18@gmail.com
https://orcid.org/0009-0000-8099-2756

Stella Chinweudo Ekwueme (PhD)
Department of Religion and Cultural Studies
University of Nigeria, Nsukka
https://orcid.org/0009-0005-7066-2856

Corresponding Author's Email: ukwuomaikechukwu@gmail.com

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Introduction

To comprehend humanity's role in the natural world, it is essential to comprehend the relationship between ecology and human civilisation. According to Begon, Townsend and Harper (2006), ecology examines the interactions between organisms, whereas human culture influences how communities perceive, use, and alter their surroundings. We refer to human culture as things made up of the customs, institutions, common values, and tangible adaptations of various cultures. We consider that universal ecological laws (e.g., carrying capacity, nutrient cycles, and energy flows) exist, but human societies have diverse cultural responses to environmental challenges, raising questions about how these laws interact with culturally specific worldviews. This study contends that although ecological principles are universal, human cultural adaptations to the environment are distinct, resulting in a conflict between localised socio-cultural systems and shared biophysical facts. The study emphasises how important it is to look at environmental issues from both a culturally grounded perspective and a universal ecological framework.

The study challenges reductionist environmental narratives by advocating for a pluralistic approach that integrates ecological universals with cultural particulars, addressing crises like climate change, and assessing tensions between global environmental governance and local knowledge systems. We begin by (i) providing ecological principles affecting humanity, (ii) exploring cultural adaptation case studies, (iii) evaluating the tensions between global environmental governance and local knowledge systems, (iv) making a critical synthesis, and (v) drawing from (i) (ii) (iii) and (iv) to contribute to a deeper understanding of humanity's place in and responsibility to nature.

Universal Ecological Principles Affecting Human Culture

The basic guidelines that control how the natural world functions are known as ecological principles. Regardless of cultural context, universal ecological principles regulate the interaction between human civilisation and the natural world. These guidelines influence cultural adaptations and govern resource utilisation, survival, and long-term sustainability. Cohen-Shacham (2019) identified certain core universal ecological principles such as interconnectedness, energy flow, nutrient cycling, limiting factors and carrying capacity as well as succession and reliance. From this we can also draw out four fundamental ecological principles upon which human-environment interactions are based: reliance on biodiversity, adaptation to climate and geography, dependency on natural resources, and the increasing human influence on ecosystems in the anthropocene. It is vital to understand these principles because they are crucial for exploring the various ways that human cultures change and adapt to their surroundings, which is why this section concentrates on looking at them.

Unarguably, human societies depend on limited natural resources, such as food, energy, and water, to survive and function as a society. Similarly, agriculture, sanitation, and biological life all depend on water, while food security is a given and influences cultural practices across all eras, from contemporary agricultural systems to

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nomadic hunter-gatherers. In the same vein, energy, which includes physical strength, fuels, and renewable resources, powers human activity and influences political power structures, economic systems, and cultural organisation. In essence, human populations are constrained by ecological factors (such as soil fertility, energy availability, and freshwater shortage) that cannot be changed. Dodds and Bartram (2016), Allouche, Middleton and Gyawali (2019) as well as Brouwer (2022) are some of the works that directly address these core ideas. All these point to the fact that cultural systems are essential for managing resource dependence because they impact how civilisations use or sustain their surroundings according to their ideals and technical advancements and (or) adjustments.

Cultural Particularities in Ecological Adaptation

Although human existence is guided by universal ecological principles, cultures create distinctive adaptations through subsistence techniques, built environments, economic systems, and cosmological beliefs. First, from high-intensity industry to low-impact foraging, human cultures have evolved a variety of subsistence techniques, each with its own consequences for sustainability. For instance, hunter-gatherer communities, such as the Kalahari Kung San, employ ecological knowledge to monitor seasonal resources and hunt wild foods in a sustainable manner, hence maintaining biodiversity (Lee & Hitchcock, 2001; Lee, 1979). This work acknowledges that there are idealised accounts, however, which frequently ignore adaptive challenges, such as being uprooted from ancestral lands by conservation enclosures (such as national parks and game reserves), underscoring the tension between contemporary conservation initiatives and traditional hunter-gatherer cultures. Whereas traditional communities use renewable energy, industrialised cultures depend on fossil fuels. This cultural shifts in energy transitions, such as Iceland's geothermal energy vs Germany' engineering pragmatism that meets with rural resistance (Radtke, 2025), are highlighted by Smil (2017), who demonstrated how energy historiography frequently ignores cultural values influencing adoption rates. The point here is that energy adoption and transition are intertwined with a society's beliefs, values, and cultural narratives, necessitating a cultural shift or adjustment for successful transition.

Furthermore, ancient Mesopotamian irrigation systems and modern desalination technologies differ due to cultural priorities and technological capacities (Shipley, 2019; Solomon, 2010). For instance, Balinese Subak systems (Lansing & de Vet, 2012) synchronise planting with temple rituals, creating a hydrological democracy. In the same vein, American industrial agriculture relies on monocultures and synthetic inputs, sacrificing resilience for yield (Montgomery, 2017). For example, neoliberal policies in California's water markets exacerbate scarcity, disrupting traditional knowledge (David & Hughes, 2024). This issue is currently ongoing in Mumbai's slums where the case is being made that water is a right (Bayliss & Deekshit, 2024) and that water scarcity prompts colonial undertones. Little wonder, Robbins (2012) challenged the Malthusian scarcity narrative, arguing that environmental issues are not caused by population growth, but by power imbalances, economic structures, and social inequalities, highlighting scarcity as a social construct.

Secondly, the climate and geography of the human environment have a significant impact on human civilisations. These elements influence survival tactics, ranging from farming methods to architectural designs, and they also impact the resources that are available (Nsamenang, 2015). For example, polar civilisations create items like snowshoes, whereas dry cultures create sophisticated irrigation systems. These illustrates how cultural creativity adjusts to environmental constraints. Today, these ancient systems are being upset by climate change, which forces society to develop new hybrid adaptations (Adger *et al*., 2013). The Inuit culture (an indigenous circumpolar people inhabiting the Arctic and subarctic regions of North America and Russia, including parts of Greenland, Canada, Alaska, and Russia) us an example of a community that thrived through specific adaptations like igloo construction and seal-hunting, reflecting a deep connection to their environment. This symbiotic relationship is highlighted by their traditional sea-ice knowledge, which views ice as a living entity that guides movement. In contrast, modern government (e.g., Canadian government) climate models treat ice as a mere hazard, creating policy that fails because it ignores this crucial relational understanding and the "dwelling perspective" of how people are embodied within their environment (Ford *et al*., 2020; Raymond-Yakoubian & Daniel, 2022).

The Bedouin and other arid-region cultures, such as the Tuareg, equally developed complex adaptations like nomadic pastoralism and water-conservation techniques to survive in harsh climates. Chatty (2010) through the Bedouin discusses how nomadic pastoralism is a sophisticated and highly adaptive strategy for coping with aridity, not a primitive way of life while Davis (2016) through the Tuaregs challenges environmental determinism by showing how political and colonial histories, rather than just climate, shape a society's vulnerability. By implication, the systems were not simply a direct response to the environment; they were disrupted by historical factors like French colonial borders (Bankoff, 2001), which made these societies more vulnerable to drought. This historical context is often overlooked by simplified environmental determinism, such as that of Diamond (2005), which failed to account for how political history shapes climate vulnerability. Another achievement that highlights the value of traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) and a comprehensive awareness of the ecosystem, challenging the notion that exploration and settlement can only be accomplished with advanced technology is the Polynesian population of the Pacific Ocean in a sustainable manner achieved through employment of ecological literacy and celestial navigation (Kirch, 2017).

Thirdly, ecosystems are essential to human survival because they supply essential services like clean water and air. Because of their foundation in biodiversity, these healthy ecosystems are more resilient and able to support human life. Indigenous societies understand biodiversity not merely as a resource but as essential to their cultural and spiritual survival, and they frequently have profound ecological knowledge and practices that reflect this interconnectivity. Since biodiversity loss undermines the basis of human well-being and a variety of lifestyles, it directly threatens ecological stability as well as cultural wealth (Toledo, 2013). A great example comes from indigenous technologies. For example, the Amazonian Yanomami view biodiversity as kin, practicing agroforestry that mimics natural ecosystems (Kopenawa & Albert, 2013). Also, the Gonds of India worship sacred groves as abodes of deities, preserving biodiversity while the Kodagu's sacred forests in India sustain endemic species through ritual protection (Bhagwat & Rutte, 2009). Similarly, Māori whakapapa ties humans to ecosystems through genealogical bonds (Salmon, 2017).

Turning attention to Nigeria, the Yoruba people in southwestern Nigeria have a deep spiritual connection to biodiversity, with conservation often rooted in religious beliefs. They protect sacred groves and forests, dedicated to deities, from human exploitation through strict taboos. This traditional conservation strategy preserves *flora* and *fauna*, while also preserving specific animal and plant species as symbols of identity for clans (Adesawe, 2023). Similarly, the Hausa people in northern Nigeria value biodiversity for its medicinal properties, using their traditional medicine system, or Hausa herbology, to create remedies for various ailments. They value plants for their healing and sustenance, contributing to traditional biodiversity management. This understanding of plant ecosystems and sustainable harvesting ensures the continued availability of resources, unlike the Yoruba-style spiritual approach (Adegbite, 2025). Then the Igbo people in South-eastern Nigeria value biodiversity for food security and socio-cultural identity. Their agricultural practices and festivals are deeply connected to yam, a symbol of sustenance and hard work. Igbo traditional food systems also include wild vegetables, fruits, and animals. Knowledge of these sources is passed down through generations, ensuring sustainable collection and use (Okeke et al, 2008; Akindele, 2021).

In contrast, Western conservation models, which often use universal concepts like "biodiversity hotspots," can clash with biocultural diversity frameworks that link species directly to a community's cultural identity and worldview. This tension suggests that while Western conservation sometimes appropriates indigenous spiritual values, it often fails to respect the land rights and self-determination of the very communities whose knowledge is essential for true conservation (Tuck & Yang, 2012). In other words, modern industrial agriculture prioritises high yields through monocultures and a reduction in biodiversity, which makes ecosystems vulnerable to collapse (Tilman, 2002). This contrasts with traditional and alternative systems that promotes biodiversity and resilience. These examples demonstrate a tension between industrial systems that prioritise endless growth ("treadmill of production") and sustainable, place-based practices. This tension is further complicated by the fact that global assessments often struggle to incorporate localised knowledge, as noted by IPBES (2019). Thus while ecosystem services like pollination and flood regulation are essential for everyone, societies prioritise them differently based on their cultural values.

Fourthly, human activity has significantly shaped the planet, leading to the Anthropocene era. This global era demands a coordinated response to global climate and ecosystem changes, considering universal ecological limits and cultural differences (Whyte, 2018). As a result, indigenous ontologies and non-Western ecological practices, like the Islamic *hima* and Jewish *shmita*, offer alternatives to the historical Western "dominion" narrative that has often justified environmental exploitation. This narrative, exported through European colonialism, created "sacrifice zones" like Nigeria's Ogoniland. In contrast, practices such as the Pacific Northwest's Potlatch demonstrated sustainable resource management. This stark difference in ecological footprints between the Global North and subsistence societies highlights a racialised ecological debt, revealing how capitalist frameworks and fossil capital theory often dismiss or ignore Indigenous knowledge and sustainable practices, such as Ecuador's Pachamama laws, which redefine agency in the Anthropocene (Pulido, 2017; Nixon, 2011).

Thus despite the unified challenge of planetary boundaries, cultural asymmetries lead to divergent solutions, from Western "command-and-control" approaches like geoengineering and de-extinction to de-growth movements and indigenous demands for ethical reciprocity, revealing a need for frameworks that can address these ideological splits in planetary stewardship. This paper posits that Latour's (2017) Gaia theory lacks tools to address such cultural asymmetries in planetary stewardship even though it identified the problem.

Case Studies: Universal Challenges, Local Solutions in the African Context

Africa's diverse ecosystems and cultures provide compelling examples of how universal environmental challenges (water scarcity, food security, and climate change) are met with locally

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rooted, culturally informed solutions. Indigenous floodplain agriculture in the Niger Delta (Delta, Rivers, and Bayelsa States) uses the natural cycle of seasonal flooding to grow crops. This practice is sustainable because it utilises the fertile silt and organic matter deposited by the floodwaters, reducing the need for chemical fertilisers (Alade & Bakoji, 2021). For example, Urhobo and Ijaw ethnic groups farmers cultivate crops like vegetables, maize, and yams on the fertile, nutrient-rich soil left behind. Some of them raise fish in the floodplains and use their waste as a natural fertiliser. Similarly, Ogoniland, which includes communities like Oghale rely on the fertile land for crops like pumpkins, maize, and cassava. Further, the Akassa community of Bayelsa aside aquaculture and fishery cultivate crops like sugarcane, pineapple, plantain, yams, cocoyam, sweet potato, etc. Furthermore, communities in arid regions (Kitui and Makueni counties as well as others) build subsurface dams to capture rainwater, recharging groundwater (Lasage *et al.*, 2008). These dams, built across seasonal riverbeds, trap sand and water during rainfall, creating underground reservoirs for domestic use, livestock, and small-scale irrigation. And it needs to be said that these low-tech solutions outperform costly desalination plants in durability and accessibility.

Lagos water crisis offer another case study. Despite investments in piped water, 70% of Lagosians (Nigeria) rely on private vendors due to mismanagement (Ajibade, Mcbean, & Kerr, 2013). Meanwhile, Makoko's floating community adapts to rising tides with vernacular architecture (Secmen & Ibrahim, 2025). In essence, postcolonial dam projects (e.g., Kainji Dam) disrupted local fisheries while failing to deliver promised irrigation (Ogunjo *et al*, 2022). This means that Africa's water solutions thrive when blending indigenous knowledge (e.g., Ethiopia's *terracing*) with targeted technology (e.g., solar-powered boreholes). Other indigenous permaculture include Nigeria's *Yoruba Forest Gardens* which mimics natural ecosystems by integrating crops like yam, cocoa, and medicinal plants (Aworinde, 2013). They boast higher biodiversity than monoculture plantations. There is also the Zimbabwe's *Pfumvudza*, a drought-resistant smallholder farming which uses mulch and minimal tillage to double maize yields (Islam, Alam, & Salahin, 2022; Mavesere, & Dzawanda, 2023). These are unlike the industrial monoculture in which colonial plantations replaced diverse agroforestry, causing soil depletion (Udom & Eze 2018). Another case is the Senegal's *Naïssé* vs. corporate land grabs in which women's collective gardens preserve millet diversity, while foreign agribusinesses drain aquifers for export crops (GRAIN, 2021).

These case studies indicate responses to climate changes and shows how global policies meets with grassroots resilience. These grassroots resilience yield local adaptation innovations such as the *Mbari* houses where the Igbos use sacred

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mud houses for passive cooling, a low-carbon alternative to concrete (Uduku, 2018) and the Sahel's *Great Green Wall*, a localised agroforestry (e.g., Faidherbia albida intercropping) which works better than state-led tree planting (Reiji, Tappan & Smale, 2009). Local farmers are utilising these tree leaves for increased crop yields, reversing environmental degradation, and improving food security, thanks to their lack of competition for sunlight and water. In contrast, carbon offset projects have evicted indigenous Baka communities in Congo Basin (Nguiffo, 2018), while Nigeria's gas flaring continues creating health damages and displacements despite COP26 pledges (Oviasuyi, Eweje & Aiyegbusi, 2022). And then in Lagos with regard to its flooding, government seawalls have failed to address the root cause (destruction of mangroves) for elite real estate (Ajibade, Armah & Ajibade, 2023).

Tensions between Universalism and Cultural Relativism

The conflict between cultural relativism and universalism affects global environmental policy. Cultural relativism respects the rights of local groups, whereas universalism, as demonstrated by global accords such as the Paris Climate Accord, advocates for a single, top-down approach. Global initiatives like REDD+ combat climate change but often lead to the eviction of indigenous communities, such as the Baka people in the Congo Basin. These projects disregard traditional land use practices and autonomy, causing climate colonialism. This is what we refer to as Western conservation models as against traditional ecological knowledge (TEK). This study aligns with "Green Grabbing" that critiques market-based conservation that commodifies ecosystems. Western conservation models often use a "wilderness" concept, removing human influence and restricting activities like controlled burns. This technocratic approach ignores local knowledge, leading to policy misfits and failure to integrate the relational understanding of the locals which have governed the ecosystem for years. In contrast, traditional ecological knowledge (TEK) is a method of conservation based on local cultural practices. Examples include Yoruba, Hausa and, Igbo people in Nigeria, Kodagu forests in India, and Balinese Subak system in Indonesia. These examples show that sustainability is not a universally applicable path, but a patchwork of regional fixes.

This tension centres on whether global sustainability should be pursued through a single, standardised model or through a multitude of diverse, culturally specific approaches. It is in this context that one questions the global seed corporations that promote hybrid maize in Nigeria (AgroNigeria, 2024). Scholars argue that this is a form of agrobiodiversity loss, where a focus on a single, high-yield crop displaces genetically diverse local varieties (Gepts, 2023). In the work of Obiageli's (2020) seminal work "Emancipatory Approach in Entertainment Education for Sustainable Social Change" gives a narration of how a community were given a new crop to cultivate. Although the crop had high yields eventually, the farmers abandoned it because it did not meet their other needs. Enquiry on the reason for abandonment showed that abundant yield was not the only interest of the framers. Hence the need to incorporate indigenous knowledge. After all, Ethiopia's seed banks preserve 150,000 indigenous varieties (Worede, 2009). These three cases shows differing mind-sets. This study argues that there is no one size-fits-all. Drawing from "Monocultures of the Mind" (Shiva, 1993) this study warns against standardizing agro-ecology. Industrialised nations often prioritise a technocratic, growth-oriented model for sustainability. This approach often leads to a homogenisation of practices, where local, diverse solutions are replaced by a one-size-fits-all model.

Obiageli's (2020) is an explication of the danger of not incorporating the community in driving sustainable change. Obiageli intensifies the critique of universalist sustainability models by highlighting participatory communication and community agency in social transformation. The approach posits that sustainable change must originate from within communities via culturally rooted narratives and locally significant modes of communication, rather than through externally enforced technocratic frameworks. In the discourse between universalism and cultural relativism, this viewpoint underscores the frequent inadequacy of development and environmental policies that exclude indigenous voices and epistemologies. The emancipatory approach emphasises the ability of communities to interpret, negotiate, and promote sustainability practices rooted in their lived experiences by endorsing entertainment-education strategies that integrate social learning within culturally relevant storytelling and media. Obiageli's framework supports the main idea of this study, which is that sustainable environmental governance should not just follow global rules but also include local knowledge systems like Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK). This way, communities can be active participants in sustainability efforts instead of just receiving them.

Synthesis and Critical Evaluation of Issues

Our central theoretical intervention is to destabilise the assumed naturalness of the universal–particular divide in environmental thought. We have argued that what is typically presented as a distinction between universal ecological constraints and culturally specific adaptations is, in fact, an epistemically produced boundary embedded in historically situated regimes of scientific authority and global environmental rule-making. Hence ecological "universals" are not simply discovered biophysical realities; instead they are stabilised through measurement infrastructures, institutional protocols, and policy architectures that privilege abstraction as the dominant mode of environmental legibility.

Across the empirical cases (Subak irrigation systems, Sahelian agroecological practices, Arctic Indigenous knowledge systems, and African floodplain adaptations), the analysis showed that ecological order is not external to society but co-produced through socio-technical and cultural assemblages. What is commonly described as "adaptation" is better understood, in line with political ecology and science and technology studies, as a process of co-production in which nature, knowledge, and governance are mutually constituted through situated practice rather than arranged in hierarchical relation.

This immediately unsettles the paper's own implicit asymmetry between ecological universality and cultural variability. By positioning ecological principles as fixed boundary conditions and cultural systems as contingent responses, environmental discourse risks reproducing what decolonial theory identifies as epistemic coloniality: the elevation of Western scientific abstraction to the status of global interpretive baseline. Yet this abstracted environmental rationality is itself historically produced, entangled with colonial extraction, capitalist expansion, and contemporary technocratic environmental management regimes that determine what counts as valid environmental truth.

At the same time, the corrective turn toward Indigenous and local ecological knowledge introduces a second-order tension. While it disrupts scientific universalism, it can also slide into epistemic essentialism, where TEK is stabilised as inherently relational, sustainable, and normatively superior. This move risks converting Indigenous knowledge into a functional resource for environmental problem-solving, thereby obscuring its internal heterogeneity, political contestation, and historical transformation. Neither scientific ecology nor TEK exists outside relations of power; both are situated knowledge formations whose authority is produced through different but comparable regimes of validation and institutional recognition.

The unresolved issue, therefore, is not the reconciliation of universality and particularity but the governance of their productive antagonism. The empirical material demonstrated that sustainability is not achieved through harmonisation but through friction: competing ways of knowing continuously negotiate what counts as ecological reality, whose knowledge becomes actionable, and which life forms are rendered viable under conditions of environmental change.

Crucially, this implied a stronger structural claim. The universal–particular distinction is not merely an analytical inconvenience but a constitutive feature of modern environmental rule. As long as ecological universals are operationalised through technocratic forms of environmental standardisation, and cultural knowledge is confined to localised arenas of practice, sustainability regimes will continue to reproduce the very asymmetries they claim to resolve. The issue is therefore not insufficient integration, but the

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political economy of environmental abstraction itself: the systematic privileging of scalable, commensurable forms of knowledge over situated, relational ecological practices.

What follows is not synthesis but an account of systemic constraint. Sustainability, under current conditions of environmental governance, cannot be understood as the harmonisation of knowledge systems. It is instead an agonistic field in which competing ontologies of nature are continuously produced, stabilised, and contested. Environmental crisis, in this framing, is not simply a failure of coordination across scales, but an effect of the very regimes through which ecological reality is rendered intelligible, governable, and administratively actionable.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the apparent opposition between universal ecological constraints and culturally specific environmental practices is less a natural divide than a historically produced way of organizing environmental knowledge and governance. What presents itself as ecological universality is, in practice, stabilised through institutionalised forms of abstraction, measurement, and policy standardisation, while cultural responses are rendered as situated adaptations within those pre-defined limits. Yet the empirical cases demonstrated that environmental order is never simply imposed by nature or interpreted by culture; it is continuously co-produced through socio-technical arrangements, local knowledge systems, and political-economic structures that determine how ecological realities become visible and actionable.

In this light, sustainability cannot be reduced to the integration of scientific and Indigenous knowledge into a unified framework. Instead, it emerges as a condition of managed tension between competing ways of knowing, governing, and inhabiting ecological systems. The persistence of environmental crisis reflects not merely gaps in coordination, but the structural consequences of privileging abstract, scalable forms of environmental reasoning over situated, relational ecologies of practice. A more adequate response, therefore, is not synthesis in the sense of resolution, but an institutional and epistemic openness to enduring pluralism—one that recognises sustainability as an ongoing negotiation within irreducible ecological and political asymmetries rather than a final state of agreement.

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The Igwebuike Model of Leadership Approach to Mitigating Crime and Insecurity in the South East, Nigeria

Abstract
This paper examined the security challenges in southeastern Nigeria and explored how the Igwebuike republican system of governance, grounded in synergy and humanism, can mitigate the persistent crisis of insecurity. Drawing on the cultural and philosophical heritage of the Igbo people, it argued that the application of Igwebuike principles collective responsibility, solidarity, and humanism can provide a sustainable framework for addressing crime through economic inclusion and community-based policing. The paper employed Marxist dialectical materialism as its analytic framework to demonstrate how economic deprivation can drive criminality. This dialectical approach, structured around thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, is used to examine the origin, escalation, and possible resolution of insecurity in the Southeast. The analysis identified prolonged economic neglect, recurring attacks by armed herders, and the perceived inability of the state to respond effectively as key historical drivers of the crisis. It concluded that insecurity can only be meaningfully addressed by tackling the material conditions that sustain deprivation and violence, particularly through inclusive economic policies and community-based security structures consistent with Igwebuike leadership principles.

Keywords: Igwebuike philosophy, Dialectical materialism, Security, Violence, Leadership.

Bernadette Chidiebere Uzozie
Department of Philosophy/Religious Studies, Tansian University Umunya
+2348037790735
(https://orcid.org/0009-0005-6527-631X)

Chukwunonso Vitalis Ogbo
National Missionary Seminary of St. Paul, Gwagwalada, Abuja
vitalog1@yahoo.com; **+2348033626794**
(https://orcid.org/0009-0003-9092-753X)

Corresponding Author's Email: uzoziechidiebere@gmail.com

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Introduction

The persistent insecurity in southeastern Nigeria is neither new nor inexplicable; it reflects decades of systemic neglect, economic marginalization, and the gradual erosion of indigenous governance structures. The region, predominantly inhabited by the Igbo, has witnessed a steady escalation of violent crimes, including kidnapping, armed robbery, and communal clashes. More recently, it has become a focal point of complex insecurity, ranging from targeted killings and abductions to confrontations between separatist groups and federal security forces.

States such as Anambra, Imo, and Ebonyi have experienced increasing attacks on security formations, destruction of public infrastructure, and the emergence of non-state armed actors operating under claims of self-determination. The Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its paramilitary wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), have developed partly in response to perceived state neglect and persistent violence attributed to armed herders, further complicating the regional security landscape. According to SMB Intelligence (2022), the region has recorded significant fatalities and displacement, with many communities resorting to self-help mechanisms due to inadequate state protection. These developments point to a deeper structural crisis rooted in political alienation and economic exclusion.

Mainstream responses to insecurity, largely defined by militarized interventions and reactive deployments, have proven insufficient and, in some cases, counterproductive. The reliance on coercive force, rather than collaboration with local communities, has deepened mistrust and widened the gap between the state and its citizens. As Nwanegbo and Odigbo (2013) observe, securitization without corresponding socio-economic reform tends to reproduce violence. In the Southeast, this dynamic has reinforced perceptions of repression, where local resistance is often criminalized (Ezeani 2013).

This study challenges the prevailing state-centric conception of security and advances the Igbo indigenous philosophy of Igwebuike (strength in unity) as a more sustainable and culturally grounded framework. Igwebuike is not merely a cultural expression but a living system rooted in collective responsibility and humanism. It reflects a republican ethos that privileges consensus, mutual aid, and shared accountability. As Edeh (1985) notes, it embodies the view that the individual exists within and through the community, and that social harmony depends on mutual obligation.

To deepen this analysis, the study adopts Marxist dialectical materialism as an interpretive lens. Through the dialectical movement of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, it examines how economic deprivation (thesis) generates resistance and state repression (antithesis), thereby necessitating a transformative synthesis grounded in indigenous leadership and community-based security structures. The Igwebuike model, with its emphasis on participatory governance and economic inclusion, thus emerges as a viable alternative to the limitations of state-centric approaches.

Accordingly, the study calls for a rethinking of security in southeastern Nigeria, one that prioritizes indigenous frameworks and community participation.

The crisis of insecurity in southeastern Nigeria requires both cultural and structural analysis. This study therefore draws on two complementary frameworks: the Igbo philosophy of Igwebuike and Marxist dialectical materialism. Igwebuike, meaning "strength in unity," emphasizes communal responsibility, participatory leadership and mutual accountability as the basis of social order. It offers a contextually relevant model for conflict resolution that is rooted in the lived realities of southeastern communities. In

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contrast, dialectical materialism provides a critical lens for examining how material conditions such as economic deprivation and political exclusion generate contradictions that fuel insecurity. While Igwebuike offers normative direction, dialectical materialism exposes the underlying economic and political forces that sustain violence. This synthesis moves beyond state-centered security by redefining protection as a shared responsibility grounded in cultural legitimacy and economic inclusion. This paper thus argues that any sustainable resolution must be rooted in systems that are culturally legitimate and socially inclusive as well as responsive to the lived realities of the people.

Historical and Socio-economic Context

The insecurity in southeastern Nigeria is deeply embedded in historical and socio-economic processes that have shaped the region's political and economic trajectory. Any meaningful leadership framework must therefore engage these underlying conditions. The effectiveness of the Igwebuike model depends not only on its philosophical coherence but also on its responsiveness to the lived realities of the people. These realities are defined by a combination of historical grievances, economic marginalization, and evolving patterns of violence.

Colonial administration under British indirect rule significantly disrupted indigenous systems of governance. By weakening traditional institutions and replacing them with warrant chiefs who lacked legitimacy, the colonial state undermined established mechanisms of accountability and conflict resolution (Afigbo 1972). This intervention eroded the communal structures that had sustained social order in precolonial Igbo society and created a legacy of institutional dislocation that persists in contemporary governance.

The postcolonial period did little to reverse these structural distortions. The Nigerian Civil War (1967–1970) further deepened the sense of marginalization among the Igbo. Although officially framed within a policy of reconciliation, the aftermath of the war left enduring economic and political imbalances. Achebe (2012) notes that the experience fostered a collective memory of exclusion that continues to shape political consciousness in the region.

Subsequent federal policies reinforced this perception. Limited infrastructural investment, restricted access to national resources, and inadequate political representation contributed to sustained economic inequality. As Nnoli (2003) argues, the uneven distribution of opportunities has perpetuated cycles of deprivation and resentment in the Southeast. This structural marginalization has created conditions in which insecurity can thrive, as communities increasingly resort to self-help mechanisms in the absence of effective state protection.

In recent years, these longstanding grievances have been compounded by new forms of violence, particularly conflicts between herders and farming communities. These clashes directly

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threaten agrarian livelihoods, leading to loss of life, destruction of farmland, and displacement. Okoli and Atelhe (2014) identify the herder–farmer conflict as a major source of insecurity in Nigeria, with significant socio-economic consequences. In the Southeast, where agriculture remains central to local economies, such disruptions intensify existing vulnerabilities.

State responses to these conflicts have largely been militarized. While intended to restore order, these interventions often fail to address root causes and are frequently perceived as excessive or ineffective. Amnesty International, (2018), reports instances of human rights violations in the management of communal conflicts, contributing to further erosion of trust between communities and the state. Rather than resolving tensions, such approaches often reinforce perceptions of marginalization and neglect.

The persistence of violence, coupled with limited confidence in formal institutions, has led to the expansion of informal security arrangements. Communities increasingly rely on vigilante groups, neighborhood watch systems, and privately funded security networks to protect lives and property. While these initiatives provide immediate responses to insecurity, they also reflect a broader crisis of state legitimacy.

This reliance on private and informal security structures creates a dual dynamic. On one hand, it enhances local capacity for protection; on the other, it raises concerns about accountability and reinforces inequality. As Alemika and Chukwuma (2004) observe, the privatization of security often results in uneven access, where those with resources can secure protection while others remain vulnerable. This fragmentation undermines the collective nature of security and weakens social cohesion.

Beyond its material consequences, insecurity has also produced significant psychological effects. Fear and uncertainty have altered everyday life, discouraging economic activity, restricting mobility, and weakening social bonds. Communities increasingly operate within a climate of suspicion and self-preservation, further eroding trust and collective solidarity.

Within this context, the relevance of the Igwebuike philosophy becomes evident. By emphasizing shared responsibility, mutual trust, and collective action, it offers a framework for countering the fragmentation associated with privatized security. Rather than delegating protection to isolated actors, it calls for the revitalization of community-based mechanisms grounded in accountability and cultural legitimacy. Such an approach not only addresses immediate security concerns but also contributes to rebuilding the social foundations necessary for long-term stability.

Dialectical Analysis of Insecurity

The patterns of historical marginalization, economic exclusion, herder–farmer conflict, and the proliferation of informal security arrangements reveal insecurity in southeastern Nigeria as a product of structural contradictions rather than isolated incidents. A dialectical approach therefore provides a more adequate framework for understanding its dynamics. Economic deprivation and political exclusion generate conditions of alienation, which in turn provoke resistance and invite state repression. Within this cycle lies the possibility of transformation through a synthesis grounded in communal solidarity. In this regard, the Igwebuike philosophy offers a basis for reimagining security through community-centered approaches.

The prevailing security architecture in Nigeria remains largely state-centric, emphasizing centralized authority and coercive enforcement. This model, inherited from colonial administrative structures, continues to shape postcolonial governance. It is characterized by top-down deployment of military and police forces, often with limited sensitivity to local socio-cultural contexts. While intended to maintain order, this approach has proven inadequate in addressing the localized and complex nature of insecurity in the Southeast.

The limitations of this model are evident in the increasing reliance of political elites and public officials on private security. The widespread use of privately funded protection is not merely symbolic but reflects a broader lack of confidence in state capacity. As Mbembe (2001) suggests, this trend signals a form of "privatization of sovereignty," where the state's claim to a monopoly on legitimate violence is weakened by the growing role of non-state actors.

State responses to insecurity are also largely reactive and militarized. The deployment of joint task forces and security checkpoints, while aimed at deterrence, often leads to allegations of human rights abuses, extortion, and further alienation of local populations. Obasi (2021) notes that such militarization has deepened mistrust between communities and the state, undermining both legitimacy and effectiveness. Rather than resolving insecurity, these measures frequently reinforce the very tensions they seek to contain.

Moreover, the state-centric model tends to overlook the specific historical and socio-political grievances of the region. Issues such as perceived marginalization, unresolved post-war tensions, and economic exclusion are often subsumed under a generalized national security framework. As Ezeani (2013) argues, this tendency results in the securitization of dissent, where legitimate grievances are treated as threats rather than addressed through dialogue. Consequently, insecurity is reproduced rather than resolved.

In response to these inadequacies, communities have increasingly turned to grassroots mechanisms of self-protection. Vigilante groups, neighborhood watch systems, and youth-led initiatives have emerged as alternative security arrangements. These responses reflect both a practical need

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for protection and a broader assertion of local agency in the face of state failure.

However, these grassroots strategies are not without challenges. Operating outside formal legal frameworks, some groups engage in extrajudicial practices, raising concerns about accountability and human rights. Chukwuma and Alemika (2004), note that the rise of vigilante formations is symptomatic of a governance crisis in which the absence of effective state security legitimizes informal and sometimes coercive alternatives. In the Southeast, this dynamic is further complicated by the presence of separatist movements such as the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its security arm, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), which are simultaneously viewed as protective and destabilizing forces.

The state's response to these developments has largely been repressive. Military operations such as "Python Dance" and "Crocodile Smile" have been deployed to restore order, but their implementation has often resulted in civilian casualties, mass arrests, and heightened fear. As Uzoechina (2014) observes, the use of force in contexts of socio-political marginalization tends to intensify rather than diminish resistance.

This interaction between grassroots resistance and state repression illustrates a dialectical tension. Communities seek to secure themselves in the absence of effective protection, while the state interprets these efforts as challenges to its authority. The resulting cycle produces a security stalemate in which neither coercion nor informal self-help yields sustainable peace, leaving civilians exposed to continued instability.

Breaking this cycle requires a shift beyond the binary of state versus non-state security. The dialectical synthesis proposed in this study redefines security as a shared responsibility rooted in communal participation. The Igwebuike model provides a framework for this synthesis by integrating collective responsibility, local knowledge, and cultural legitimacy. Rather than privileging control, it emphasizes collaboration, trust, and inclusivity as the basis for sustainable security.

Igwebuike Model and Indigenous Strategies for Security (Revised & Compressed)

Against the backdrop of state inadequacies and grassroots resistance, a synthesis emerges that reconceptualizes security as a shared communal responsibility rather than a monopoly of the state. This synthesis finds expression in the Igwebuike model, an indigenous philosophical framework rooted in the Igbo worldview. Igwebuike, meaning "strength in unity," emphasizes solidarity, mutual responsibility, and collective agency. It functions not only as a cultural ideal but as a practical ethic guiding social organization, conflict resolution, and community protection.

Philosophically, Igwebuike is grounded in a relational ontology that privileges communal existence over individualism.

As Kanu (2015) argues, it affirms complementarity and shared identity as the basis of social life. Within this framework, leadership is not conceived as domination but as service—an integrative and participatory role derived from communal trust. This is particularly significant in southeastern Nigeria, where the perceived distance between the state and the people has weakened institutional legitimacy. By re-centering leadership within the moral and cultural fabric of the community, the Igwebuike model offers a corrective to this disconnection.

In practical terms, this orientation transforms security into a collective endeavor sustained by mutual obligation. The Igbo ethic *onye aghala nwanne ya* ("let no one abandon his brother") encapsulates this sense of shared responsibility. Community-based security initiatives, therefore, are not merely reactive measures but expressions of an underlying cultural logic that views protection as a communal duty.

One of the most prominent manifestations of this model is community policing. Unlike centralized policing systems that are often reactive and detached, community policing in the Southeast is participatory and preventive. It draws on local knowledge, social networks, and everyday interactions to detect and deter criminal activity. As Kpae and Adishi (2017) note, such localized approaches are most effective when communities are treated as active partners rather than passive recipients of security.

Closely related is the practice of civic vigilance through whistle-blowing. Public campaigns, such as those encouraging residents to report individuals displaying unexplained wealth, reflect a shift toward collective accountability. These initiatives reinforce the idea that security is a shared responsibility and that community members play a crucial role in maintaining social order.

Another significant strategy is the revival of oath-taking as a moral and spiritual deterrent. In traditional Igbo society, oaths serve as binding covenants that invoke moral consequences for wrongdoing. Their contemporary application reflects an effort to reinforce communal norms in contexts where formal legal mechanisms are weak or distrusted. Nwankwo (2021) and Nwosu (2020) highlight the continued relevance of such indigenous practices in crime control.

Youth engagement also constitutes a central component of the Igwebuike model. By integrating young people into security and governance structures, communities can reduce their vulnerability to criminal involvement while fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility. Initiatives that provide employment opportunities, leadership roles, and community participation help redirect youth energies toward constructive ends.

Economic inclusion further strengthens these strategies by addressing the material roots of insecurity. Drawing on traditional practices of communal labor and cooperative enterprise, communities can create sustainable livelihoods that reduce the appeal of criminal activity. Chukwu (1995) emphasizes that such economic systems historically reinforced both financial stability and social cohesion. Contemporary adaptations, including community-based enterprises and vocational initiatives, continue to demonstrate their relevance.

Taken together, these strategies illustrate how the Igwebuike model integrates cultural values, social structures, and economic practices into a coherent framework for security. By emphasizing participation, accountability, and inclusion, it offers a holistic alternative to centralized and coercive approaches. Rather than treating insecurity as a purely criminal issue, it addresses the broader social and economic conditions that sustain it, thereby enhancing the prospects for long-term stability.

Conclusion

This study has examined insecurity in southeastern Nigeria as a product of historical marginalization, economic deprivation, and the limitations of state-centric security approaches. It has argued that the Igwebuike philosophy, with its emphasis on communal solidarity, participatory leadership, and moral accountability, provides a viable and culturally grounded framework for addressing these challenges.

Through a dialectical analysis, the study has shown how structural deprivation and political exclusion generate cycles of resistance and repression. The Igwebuike model offers a synthesis that moves beyond this cycle by re-centering security within the community and linking it to broader processes of social and economic inclusion. Practices such as community policing, civic vigilance, oath-taking, youth engagement, and cooperative economic initiatives demonstrate the practical relevance of this approach.

In light of these findings, several recommendations emerge. First, there is a need for formal recognition and integration of indigenous security structures within the national security framework, with appropriate legal and institutional safeguards. Second, traditional and community leaders should be supported through capacity-building initiatives to enhance their roles in conflict mediation, youth mobilization, and local governance. Third, youth engagement must be prioritized, not only as a security measure but as a broader development strategy aimed at reducing vulnerability to criminal activity. Finally, economic inclusion should be pursued as a central component of security policy, particularly through investments in community-based enterprises, vocational training, and cooperative systems.

Federal and indigenous approaches to security in the southeast differ fundamentally in philosophy and practice. Federal strategies rely on militarization and centralize control, which often lack local legitimacy and fail to address the socio-economic roots of insecurity. This top-down approach has deepened mistrust and reproduced violence in many cases. By contrast, the Igwebuike model emphasizes participation, moral accountability and restorative engagement through practices such as community policing, civic vigilance, oath-taking, and youth inclusion. It addresses both the causes and manifestations of insecurity by linking protection to economic and social inclusion.

However, indigenous mechanisms are not without limitations. Issues of accountability, potential abuse and internal inequalities such as gender and generational hierarchies must be acknowledged. Without formal oversight and legal safeguards, community-based systems risk replicating the same injustices they seek to resolve. Obviously then, the Igwebuike model is most effective when integrated within broader institutional frameworks that ensure transparency and protection of human rights. Despite these challenges, its emphasis on solidarity and shared humanity provides a culturally legitimate pathway towards sustainable peace in a context where state institutions remain distant or ineffective.

The fact remains that sustainable security cannot be achieved through coercion alone. It requires rebuilding trust, addressing structural inequalities, and fostering inclusive participation. The Igwebuike model underscores the importance of community agency in this process, demonstrating that effective security is not imposed from above but cultivated through shared responsibility and collective action. In reaffirming the relevance of indigenous leadership, this study highlights the need to re-center local values, institutions, and experiences in the pursuit of peace. The Igwebuike philosophy offers not merely an alternative framework but a practical pathway toward a more inclusive, legitimate and enduring security order in southeastern Nigeria.

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A Critical Appraisal of National Interest and Nigeria's Foreign Policy

Abstract

National interest is the guiding principle towards the formulation execution of effective foreign policy. However, in the case of Nigeria, there are external and internal factors that posed as hinderances to the effectiveness of national interest in the pursuit of the nation's foreign policy objectives. This study investigated national interest and Nigeria's foreign policy using concentric theory of international relations. Questioning and interview were administered to the chosen population and responses were derived, which gave credibility and validity to the research. The quantitative data generated from questionnaires were presented in chart and analyzed using Microsoft excel statistical tool, whereas data generated from interview were at first transcribed and analyzed thematically. The findings of the study revealed that National interest played a crucial role in the pursuit of Nigeria's foreign policy as well as in the nations engagement with foreign government and international organizations in advancing Nigeria's foreign policy goals. the study recommended that Nigeria government should endeavor to diversify its economy in order to generate more revenue that can be used in addressing the challenge of insufficient/poor funding of diplomatic mission.

Keywords: National interest, Foreign. policy, Diplomacy, External/Internal Factors, International Relations.

Tanko Adnan Tanko

Faculty of Social Science

Department of Pollical Science

Nassarawa State University Keffi.

Prof, Bello Muhammad B.

Faculty of Social Science

Department of Pollical Science

Nassarawa State University Keffi.

Assc Prof, Ruth Caleb

Faculty of Social Science

Department of Pollical Science.

Nassarawa State University, Keffi.

ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-8505-2524

Corresponding Author's Email: adnantankoadnan@Yahoo.Com

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Introduction

The historical antecedent of Nigeria's foreign policy owes much to the vision of Alhaji Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa. Nigeria's first Prime Minister and Head of Government from October 1960 to January 1966, and can be located in his famous speeches during the pre and post- independent periods. The objectives of Nigeria Foreign Policy are enshrined in Chapter two, section 19 of the 1999 constitution of the federal republic of Nigeria under the rubric of fundamental objectives and directive principle of state policy (Lawal & Aluko, 2019).

Nigeria's political leaders believe that committing Nigeria to a foreign policy that encourages and promotes peace, security and development in the West

African sub-region would enhance her national interest. Thus, Nigeria's national interest of domestic peace and regional responsibilities placed heavy commitment on that. This corroborates Wale & Prey's (2020) position that "Nigeria's strategic location, national interest, assumed responsibilities and status in West Africa informed its commitment to regional politics."

Nigeria is a major player in the world of diplomacy as the most populous black nation in the world with diverse natural and material endowments. The country is saddled with enormous international responsibilities, not only in Africa where it is a continental leader, but its diplomacy is also connected to every corner of the world (Oshewolo, 2019). To facilitate its relations with the rest of the world, Nigeria has established several foreign missions. These missions have steadily increased over the years. For illustrative purposes, as a result of the oil boom in the 1970s, Nigeria's missions abroad expanded greatly. This was done to give effect to the country's hegemonic status in Africa and accelerate its level of development (Saliu, 2018). According to Oshewolo (2020), while in 1970 Nigeria had only 46 diplomatic missions abroad, by 1975, the number of missions had increased considerably to around 80. Now, the country has over 100 missions abroad (Saliu, 2018).

There is a consensus that there are five core values or ingredients that constitute what can be seen as Nigeria's vital interests. These are "self-preservation or survival, security, economic well-being or prosperity, prestige or honour and peace" (Eminue, 2013:76). Self- preservation or survival is the most fundamental ingredient of any nation's national interest. Self-preservation or survival includes the need for internal unity and political stability. "The preservation of the nation as a political unit is considered the sine qua non of a nation's foreign policy and therefore, a paramount consideration because, without that imperative of national survival, no other value, goal or objective can be realized" (Eminue 2018). Morgenthau described national interest as the "irreducible minimum" element of foreign policy states thus: The survival of a political unit, such as a nation, the determination of its content in concrete situation is relatively simple: for it encompasses the integrity of the nation's territory, of its political institution and of its culture. The survival of any nation is at stake whenever its territory is threatened with an imminent attack or is actually attacked. Any shift in the balance of power that favors a state's adversary may be seen as an indirect threat to that state's survival (Ebegbulem, 2019).

Certain factors that are basic influenced the shaping of Nigeria foreign policy and those products of factors that are internal and external to Nigeria. Among these factors, are the nature and structure of Nigerian economy and which is mono cultural and oil driven, geo-political location in West Africa, the nature of political leadership, military capability, population and domestic political situation in Nigeria (Kayode, 2016). These factors be it internal or external has to a large extent kept some commentators and analyst in a state of dilemma as to whether Nigeria's foreign policy is conducted in line with the nation's national interest or not. Others sees Nigeria's national interest as inextricably linked to the selfish interest of the ruling class.

From the foregoing, this study argues that after viewing the relationship that exists between foreign policy and national interest, there are elements of national interest that appears constant in foreign policy, while there are others that may be contextual or may remain in the realm of ideals to be attained in the future.

It is against this background that this study is set out to investigate Nigeria's foreign policy and national interest

Research Questions

i. What is the role of National interest in the pursuit of Nigeria's foreign policy?

ii. How has Nigeria's national interest worked towards achieving the country's foreign policy objectives?

Research Objectives

The general objective of the study is to investigate national interest and Nigeria's foreign policy, whereas as the specific objectives are to:

i. Examine the role of National interest in the pursuit of Nigeria's foreign policy

ii. Examine how Nigeria's national interest worked towards achieving the country's foreign policy objectives

Theoretical Framework.

Concentric Circle Theory

Concentric circle theory was initially propounded by a Sociologist Ernest Burgess in 1925 when it was used to provide an insight into the organization of urban social structures (Burgess, 1925). However, in the Nigerian context, it was Former Nigerian Permanent Representative to the United Nations, Ibrahim Gambari that employed the theory to regulate Nigerian foreign policy thrust when he served as External Affairs Minister under Buhari/Idiagbon regime between 1984 and 1985 (Benjamin 2014). So, according to Gambari, the Nigerian Foreign policy will thrive well if concerted efforts were made by scholars and policy makers alike to develop the segment approach to Nigerian foreign policy conduct. This he believed will help to protect and promote the country's national interest. By concentricism, Gambari upheld the value that Nigerian national interest should take priority over other interests, such that Citizens' welfare would come first followed by West Africa Sub region, then Africa, then the extant world.

The "concentric circles" model of Agboola Gambari in (1989) provide a framework which established the fundamental role of the domestic environment in the evolution and development of a nation's foreign policy. The domestic being the innermost circle of Nigerian foreign policy, also has other critical elements which include security, ethnic, economics and political challenges as the domestic environment poses limitations to the realisation of the nation's effectiveness in foreign affairs.

The innermost circle indicates Nigeria's own security, independence and prosperity are centered on its immediate neighbor. Benin, Cameroon, Chad, and Niger while the second circle revolves around Nigeria with West Africans countries at large in regional development, the third circle focuses on continental Africa, on issues of peace, development, human rights, democratisation, good governance, integration, while the fourth circle involves or relates with international organizations in the world on bilateral and multilateral matters (Omotere, et al 2011).

Methods of Data Collection

Data for this research was collected using both primary and secondary method of data collection.

Primary Sources of Data

Primary data were gathered through the administration of structured and closed-ended questionnaire instrument, using Likert Scale method. The questionnaire consists of part A, B, C and D. Part A comprise of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents' section whereas the part B, C, and D of the questionnaire contained questions generated from the research questions for the sole purpose of achieving the research objectives. A total of 271 questionnaires were administered.

On the other hand, open ended interview guide was designed to elicit complementary information. These methods were used to gather information from 12 KII who are officials/staff of the above-named organizations.

Secondary Sources of Data

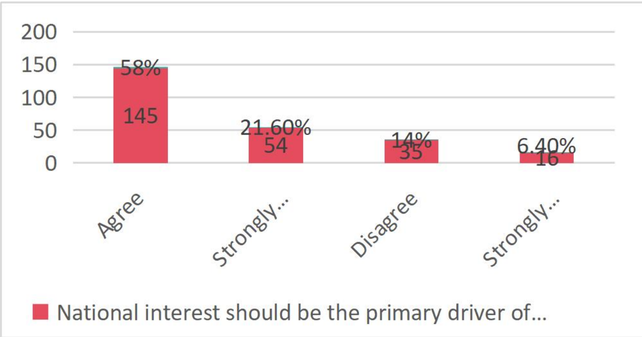
The sources for gathering secondary data in this research includes relevant journals of security studies, counterinsurgency, bilateral relations among others and text books. Furthermore, library search, lectures, seminar papers, NIPSS publications, policy papers, newspapers, news magazines and Internet sources also form part of the secondary sources of data collection.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The survey design involved the gathering of data from primary sources through questionnaire and KII. The analysis of data was conducted utilizing simple frequency analysis. This technique was adopted due to its precise and unambiguous nature. The data collected were presented in tables and charts to provide graphical aid to the interpretations of results obtained. The findings of the field survey are buttressed with the data from secondary sources as highlighted in previous chapters of this research.

The study administered questionnaire to sampled population. A total number of 271 copies of questionnaire were administered across all strata of the sampled population, out of which 250 were retrieved, representing 92 per cent response rate, while 21 copies of the questionnaire were not returned representing 8% per cent. With this response rate, it can be assumed that the administration of questionnaire has covered to a large extent, the scope that can provide the required assessment.

Figure 1: Assessing Whether National Interest Should be The Primary Driver of Nigeria's Foreign Policy Decisions.



Respondents were asked to assess whether or not national interest should be the primary driver of Nigeria's foreign policy decisions.

Figure 2: Assessment of National Interest Should be The Primary Driver of Nigeria's Foreign Policy Decisions.

The analysis in Figure 1 shows that majority of respondents cumulatively ranking 199 (79.6 per cent) respondents assessed the national interest should be the primary driver of Nigeria's foreign policy decisions and considered it to be significant contributor. Only 20.4 per cent of respondents cumulatively opined that national interest should not be the primary driver of Nigeria's foreign policy decisions.

It could be surmised from the analysis that the national interest should be the primary driver to the formulation and implementation of a nation's foreign policy. Hence, the need for Nigeria to always put its national interest in consideration when formulating the foreign policy in order to achieve the nation's foreign policy objectives.

Figure 2: Ascertaining whether Nigeria's National Interest has played a Significant Role in Shaping and Guiding the Country's Foreign Policy Decisions.

Another question posed to the respondents was to ascertain whether or not Nigeria's national interest has played a significant role in shaping and guiding the country's foreign policy decisions.

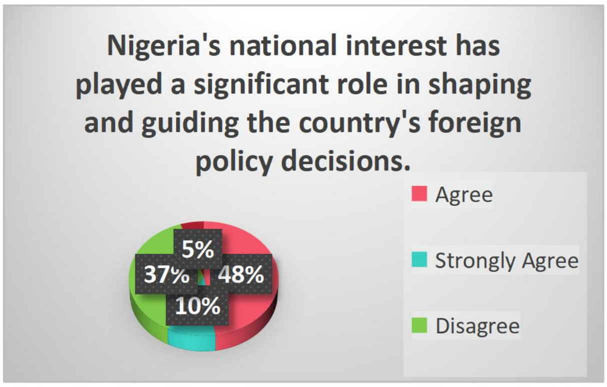


Figure Respondents view on whether Nigeria's National Interest has played a Significant Role in Shaping and Guiding the Country's Foreign Policy Decisions.

Figure 2: above depicts that, 145 respondents representing 58 per cent cumulatively opined that the Nigeria's national interest has played a significant role in shaping and guiding the country's foreign policy decisions. In addition, 37 per cent and 5 per cent of respondents disagreed and strongly disagreed that Nigeria's national interest has played a significant role in shaping and guiding the country's foreign policy decisions.

It is, therefore, imperative for the Nigerian government and stakeholders involved in foreign policy making and diplomatic practice to ensure that their actions and inactions are in tandem with the ideal national interests and foreign policy objectives of the nation as enshrined in the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria as amended 2011.

Figure 3: Ascertaining whether or not Nigeria's National Interest Has Played a Significant Role in Guiding and Shaping the Country's Foreign Policy Decisions.

Respondents were asked to ascertain whether or not Nigeria's national interest has played a significant role in guiding and shaping the country's foreign policy decisions.

Figure 3: Respondents view on Whether Nigeria's National Interest Has Played a Significant Role in Guiding and Shaping the Country's Foreign Policy Decisions.

The analysis on Figure 5: above shows that majority of the respondents cumulatively 50.4 per cent concur to the fact that Nigeria's national interest has played a significant role in guiding and shaping the country's foreign policy decisions, whereas, 49.6 per cent cumulatively disagreed with the posed question.

In line with the forgoing analysis, a Director from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Abuja (20/12/23) submitted that Nigeria's national interest has played a significant role in guiding and shaping the country's foreign policy decisions. National interest provides a framework for identifying and prioritizing the objectives and concerns that are crucial for Nigeria's development, security, and well-being. It helps in determining the focus areas, strategic partnerships, and diplomatic engagements that align with our national priorities. By considering our national interest, we can make informed and strategic decisions that promote Nigeria's regional and global influence, protect our citizens abroad, attract foreign investment, and contribute to international peace and stability.

Discussion of Findings

The study unveiled that national interest played a crucial role in the pursuit of Nigeria's foreign policy as well as in the nation's engagement with foreign governments and international organizations to advance Nigeria's foreign policy goals as well as promotion of economic interests and attracting foreign investments. In corroborating the findings of the research, it was alluded that the emphasis of national interest and foreign policy is now on investment and economic cooperation.

The study established that Nigeria's national interest has played a significant role in shaping and guiding the country's foreign policy decisions in the sense that the national interest of the nation align with its foreign policy objectives Furthermore, it was observed that there is a consensus that there are five core values or ingredients that constitute what can be seen as Nigeria's national interests. These are "self-preservation or survival, security economic well-being or prosperity, prestige or honour and peace.

From the foregoing, this study argues that after viewing the relationship that exists between foreign policy and national interest, there are elements of national interest that appear constant in foreign policy, while there are others that may be contextual or may remain in the realm of ideals to be attained in the future. It can be said that, as a matter of fact, Nigeria's national interest, within the framework of its foreign policy, has to a large extent aided the country by giving it a sense of direction and bearing in its pursuit of foreign policy.

Finally, even though the foundation of a rational foreign policy is beset with difficulties, a state must have some clear conception of the policy goals it desires to achieve in her interaction with other states in the international community. The first task in foreign policy formulation therefore, must be to identify the goals (national interests) to be achieved.

Conclusion

Since independence, Nigeria have been involved in foreign relations through balancing and rebalancing of negotiations with countries of the world. Sometimes it requires persuasion and inducement strategies to pursue the foreign policy objectives in line with the national interest. The foreign policy of Nigeria is specially established and saddled with the onus responsibility of promoting the external image of the nation as well as promote and pursue with all rigor the foreign policy objectives of the nation.

No doubt, Nigeria's national interest has to a large extent been actively involved in shaping and guiding the execution of the foreign policy objectives, however, there are myriads of internal and external hurdles that posed hindrance to the effectiveness of the national interest in the pursuit of the nation's foreign policy goals. These challenges ranges from poor funding of the diplomatic mission to appointment of unqualified diplomats to represent the nation as well as influence of superpowers and strong economies who directly or indirectly influence the foreign policy objectives.

By and large the diplomatic skills of Africa and indeed Nigeria are tested mostly during periods of conflicts and threats to regional security which form part of the foreign policy objectives of the Nigeria. The study made some recommendations to improve the situations around the challenges militating against the successes of Nigeria's foreign policy on the basis of national interest in ensuring the actualization of the nation's foreign policy objectives.

Recommendations

i. Nigerian government should endeavor to diversify its economy in order to generate more revenue that can be used to address the challenge of insufficient/poor funding of the diplomatic mission so as to enable the diplomats discharge their duties efficiently and effectively in line with the nation's national interest.

ii. The Federal Ministry of Foreign Affairs should device an effective foreign policy measures that can be used in the pursuit of the foreign policy objectives of the country on the basis of national interest.

iii. Appointment into the position of diplomat should be done within the career diplomats rather than political appointees in order to ensure that the best are selected to represent and pursue the foreign policy objectives of the nation which will be tied to the national interest of the country.

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Digital Identity, the Self and an Anthropological Reading of Social Media through Byung-Chul Han

Emmanuel Edeh PHD

Department of Philosophy

Claretian University of Nigeria

ORCID ID: 0009-0000-5360-5415

Corresponding Author's Email: emmanueledeh62@yahoo.com

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Abstract

Using an anthropological and critical-philosophical interpretation of digital culture, this paper explored the reconfiguration of human identity in the era of social media, mainly referencing Byung-Chul Han's ideas. It maintained that by turning identity into a regime of visibility, performance, and ongoing self-optimization, social media platforms have radically changed the conditions of selfhood. The self in our digital world is being built through carefully chosen photos, algorithmic feedback, and social validation measures like likes and followers rather than being largely based on physical presence or interior depth. The paper illustrated how digital platforms exacerbate self-exploitation processes while concurrently undermining interiority and contemplative life, drawing on Han's critique of neoliberal subjectivity, transparency culture, and the accomplishment society. The article further showed that the logic of hypervisibility promoted by social media contributes to the disappearance of alterity, as relational encounters are replaced by algorithmically filtered sameness and echo chambers of affirmation. This shift produces a fragmented and exhausted subject who is perpetually exposed yet paradoxically alienated from authentic self-understanding. From an anthropological perspective, the article highlights how digital identity marks a transformation of the human being into a hybrid entity shaped by both technological infrastructures and neoliberal cultural imperatives. It concludes by suggesting that a critical rethinking of digital subjectivity is necessary in order to recover dimensions of interiority, ethical relation, and meaningful presence in contemporary life.

Keywords: Digital identity; social media; philosophical anthropology; Byung-Chul Han; selfhood; neoliberal subjectivity.

Introduction

The emergence of digital technology and social media has radically transformed the structure of contemporary human existence. In the twenty-first century, identity is no longer formed solely through embodied interpersonal relations, cultural traditions, or stable social institutions; rather, it is increasingly mediated by digital platforms that shape how individuals present themselves, communicate, and seek recognition. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X have become spaces where the self is continuously constructed, displayed, modified, and evaluated through networks of visibility and interaction. Consequently, digital culture has altered not only communication but also the philosophical understanding of what it means to be a person in technologically mediated societies. Recent studies observe that digital identity has evolved from a static representation of the individual into an algorithmically produced and socially regulated process shaped by data extraction, platform governance, and performative visibility (Taylor *et al.,* 2023). The rise of digital culture has therefore generated profound anthropological and philosophical questions concerning selfhood, freedom, embodiment, and relationality. Scholars increasingly argue that social media encourages the commodification of personality through self-branding, constant self-disclosure, and the pursuit of validation in digital environments (Barros *et al.*, 2023). The human self is gradually transformed into a visible project that must remain permanently active, attractive, and socially recognizable. This condition reflects what Byung-Chul Han describes as the transparency society, where digital technologies dissolve privacy and interiority through voluntary self-exposure and psychopolitical control. Han argues that individuals in digital culture willingly participate in systems of surveillance by constantly producing data about themselves, thereby transforming freedom into a subtle mechanism of self-exploitation.

The central problem this article addresses is **how social media reshape the anthropological understanding of the self in contemporary digital culture.** In responding to this question, the article draws on the critical philosophy of Byung-Chul Han, whose works on transparency, burnout, and digital capitalism provide a powerful framework for interpreting the transformation of subjectivity under neoliberal and technological conditions. Han argues that contemporary digital culture intensifies regimes of exposure and self-optimization, producing a subject that is both hyper-visible and increasingly exhausted (Ferreira, 2026). The research is guided by three interrelated questions which are: (i) what form of self emerges within digital social spaces? (ii) How does the logic of visibility displace interiority in social media culture? (iii) What are the broader anthropological implications of digitally mediated identity formation? Methodologically, the study adopts a philosophical-anthropological approach combined with critical theory, enabling a reflective engagement with both conceptual and cultural dimensions of digital subjectivity. This inquiry situates digital identity not merely as a technological phenomenon but as a deep transformation of human self-understanding in late modernity.

Conceptual Framework

This section establishes the conceptual and theoretical foundations for interpreting digital identity as an anthropological and philosophical problem. It integrates contemporary debates in digital media theory, philosophical anthropology, and critical theory, while foregrounding the diagnostic framework of Byung-Chul Han. The aim is to clarify how social media reconfigures the structure of selfhood under conditions of algorithmic mediation, neoliberal rationality, and intensified visibility.

Digital Identity

Digital identity has become a central philosophical concern in contemporary thought due to the increasing entanglement of human subjectivity with technological systems. Identity in digital environments is no longer fixed or stable but is instead fluid, performative, and continuously reshaped through interaction with platforms and algorithms. Recent studies argue that online identity is co-constructed by users and algorithmic infrastructures that determine visibility, relevance, and social recognition (van Dijck, 2020).

Anthropological Conceptions of the Self

Classical philosophical anthropology understands the self as an embodied, relational, and dialogical being. Thinkers such as Aristotle, Augustine, and later phenomenological traditions emphasize that human identity is rooted in lived embodiment, intersubjective relations, and reflective consciousness. The self emerges through encounter, memory, and ethical relation rather than mere representation. Modern anthropology and social theory, however, introduced a shift toward psychological and narrative conceptions of identity, where the self is understood as an evolving story constructed through temporal continuity and subjective interpretation (Ricoeur, 1992).

Han's idea of **Digital Identity and the Self**

The philosophy of Byung-Chul Han provides one of the most penetrating critiques of digital culture and contemporary technological society. Han's work explores how neoliberal capitalism, digital communication, and technological surveillance reshape human subjectivity and social existence. Unlike traditional forms of disciplinary power described by Michel Foucault, Han argues that contemporary digital society operates through subtle mechanisms of psychopolitical control in which individuals willingly participate in their own domination. Social media, in this context, functions not merely as a communication tool but as a system that transforms human beings into transparent, performative, and self-exploiting digital subjects. Central to Han's theory is the concept of the transparency society. According to Han, contemporary digital culture is driven by an obsession with visibility, openness, and exposure. Transparency is presented as a positive social value associated with freedom, communication, and participation. However, Han contends that excessive transparency destroys privacy, mystery, contemplation, and interiority. Human beings increasingly feel compelled to expose their thoughts, emotions, activities, and relationships through social media platforms. The digital subject exists under conditions of permanent visibility where self-worth becomes dependent upon online recognition and public exposure. In this sense, transparency transforms human existence into a spectacle governed by visibility and data circulation (Han, 2020).

Closely connected to transparency is the phenomenon of self-exposure and voluntary surveillance. Unlike traditional surveillance imposed externally by authoritarian institutions, digital surveillance is often willingly embraced by individuals who continuously share personal information online. Social media users voluntarily upload images, opinions, locations, and personal experiences in exchange for recognition and participation within digital networks. Han argues that neoliberal digital culture transforms surveillance into a pleasurable and normalized activity. Individuals no longer experience themselves as victims of surveillance but as active participants in systems of data production. Consequently, social media platforms extract behavioral data that can be used for prediction, manipulation, and economic profit. This voluntary surveillance reflects a deeper transformation in which freedom itself becomes integrated into systems of digital control.

Han conceptualizes this transformation through the notion of psychopolitics. Psychopolitics refers to forms of power that operate through psychological motivation, self-management, and emotional optimization rather than coercion. In neoliberal societies, individuals are encouraged to maximize productivity, positivity, visibility, and performance. The digital subject internalizes the demands of efficiency and self-improvement, becoming both the exploiter and the exploited. Social media intensifies this condition by encouraging users to constantly produce content, maintain online presence, and cultivate digital relevance. The result is a culture of self-exploitation in which individuals willingly subject themselves to emotional exhaustion, anxiety, and burnout in pursuit of recognition and validation. Han therefore argues that neoliberalism transforms freedom into a mechanism of domination because individuals perceive self-exploitation as personal achievement and self-expression.

Another significant aspect of Han's thought is his discussion of the disappearance of the Other. Han maintains that digital communication weakens genuine alterity and ethical encounter. In traditional human relationships, the Other appears as a mystery that challenges self-centered existence and demands ethical openness. However, digital culture increasingly reduces relationships to consumable interactions governed by immediacy, similarity, and algorithmic personalization. Social media platforms expose individuals primarily to content that reinforces their preferences and identities, thereby diminishing meaningful engagement with difference and otherness. The disappearance of the Other contributes to narcissistic self-enclosure in which individuals encounter reflections of themselves rather than authentic interpersonal relationships.

This condition is further expressed through digital narcissism and fatigue culture. Social media encourages continuous self-presentation and comparison, leading individuals to perceive themselves as projects requiring constant optimization and visibility. The pursuit of likes, followers, and engagement transforms identity into a marketable performance. Han argues that this endless pressure for positivity and productivity produces psychological exhaustion, depression, and emotional fatigue. Contemporary society becomes what he describes as the "burnout society," characterized not by external oppression but by excessive self-demand and overstimulation. Constant connectivity eliminates opportunities for silence, contemplation, and rest, thereby weakening the capacity for authentic self-reflection and deep human relation. Han's critique of positivity and constant connectivity further illuminates the anthropological consequences of digital culture. Neoliberal digital society privileges positivity, speed, and uninterrupted communication while rejecting negativity, limitation, and silence. Yet Han insists that genuine human existence requires spaces of contemplation, withdrawal, and critical distance. Constant connectivity fragments attention and reduces human experience to instantaneous reactions and digital consumption. The digital subject becomes trapped within cycles of stimulation and performance that undermine freedom, autonomy, and existential depth. Han's philosophy therefore provides a critical framework for understanding how digital capitalism reconstructs human identity through mechanisms of visibility, surveillance, and psychopolitical control.

Digital Identity and the Crisis of Authentic Selfhood

One of the defining characteristics of contemporary digital culture is the transformation of identity into a performative project continuously shaped through social media participation. In technologically mediated societies, individuals increasingly construct and communicate selfhood through digital performances designed for public visibility and social recognition. Social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, and X encourage users to curate personal narratives through images, videos, captions, and symbolic expressions that project desirable versions of the self. Consequently, identity becomes less a stable existential reality and more a continuously edited performance governed by audience expectations and algorithmic visibility. This condition has given rise to curated identities and aestheticized existence. Digital selfhood is increasingly organized around visual presentation, emotional branding, and symbolic consumption. Individuals selectively display aspects of their lives that correspond to socially desirable ideals such as success, beauty, productivity, happiness, and influence. Everyday existence is transformed into aesthetic content intended for digital circulation and approval.

Philosophically, this aestheticization reflects the transition from lived authenticity to representational identity, where appearance often becomes more significant than being itself. Contemporary scholars argue that social media culture encourages individuals to interpret their lives through the logic of visibility and performance rather than through inward reflection and existential depth (Abidin, 2021). The emergence of influencer culture further intensifies the commodification of personality and identity. Influencers function not merely as entertainers but as symbolic entrepreneurs who transform personal experiences, lifestyles, opinions, and relationships into marketable digital content. In this context, the self becomes a commercial object capable of generating economic value through engagement, sponsorships, and online popularity. The boundaries between personal identity and economic productivity become increasingly blurred, as individuals are encouraged to monetize visibility and cultivate personal brands. This development reflects what Byung-Chul Han describes as neoliberal self-exploitation, where individuals willingly transform themselves into entrepreneurial projects driven by digital competition and symbolic consumption.

The contemporary digital environment is profoundly shaped by the human desire for visibility and recognition. Social media platforms operate according to economies of attention in which visibility determines relevance, influence, and participation. In digital culture, to be visible often means to exist socially, while invisibility risks marginalization and exclusion. Consequently, individuals increasingly seek validation through likes, follows, comments, shares, and other forms of digital engagement that function as indicators of recognition and social worth. The desire for validation through digital engagement reflects deeper anthropological and philosophical concerns regarding recognition and human identity. Human beings are relational creatures who seek acknowledgment and affirmation from others. Philosophers such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and Axel Honneth emphasize that identity develops through intersubjective recognition. Social existence depends upon being seen, acknowledged, and valued within communal structures. Social media amplifies this dynamic by quantifying recognition through numerical indicators of engagement. Likes, reactions, and follower counts become symbolic measures of social acceptance and personal significance. This process contributes to what may be called digital existence, where identity increasingly depends upon online visibility and participation. Individuals often experience anxiety when digital recognition declines because visibility becomes intertwined with self-esteem and social belonging. Social media platforms therefore create psychological conditions in which human worth appears dependent upon continuous public affirmation. Contemporary research suggests that excessive dependence on digital validation contributes to emotional instability, self-comparison, and diminished self-worth, particularly among young people immersed in online environments (Twenge, 2023). Visibility in digital culture also functions as social capital. Social capital traditionally refers to the social advantages derived from relationships, networks, and communal trust. In digital society, visibility itself becomes a form of symbolic power capable of generating influence, opportunities, and economic benefit. Influencers, celebrities, activists, and ordinary users compete within economies of attention where visibility determines cultural relevance and authority. Algorithms further reinforce this condition by prioritizing highly visible content and rewarding continuous engagement. Consequently, digital platforms create hierarchies of visibility in which social value is increasingly measured through audience reach and online influence. This condition transforms recognition from an ethical relation into a competitive struggle for attention and digital relevance.

The expansion of digital technology has also intensified new forms of surveillance and self-discipline that profoundly shape contemporary identity formation. Unlike traditional forms of surveillance associated with centralized institutions, digital surveillance operates subtly through participation, connectivity, and voluntary data sharing. Social media users continuously generate data through online interactions, searches, preferences, locations, and behavioral patterns that are collected and analyzed by digital platforms. Surveillance in the digital age therefore becomes decentralized, normalized, and integrated into everyday life. One of the most significant aspects of this transformation is the emergence of internalized surveillance mechanisms. Drawing from Michel Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power, contemporary digital culture encourages individuals to monitor and regulate themselves according to social expectations and algorithmic norms. Social media users become highly conscious of visibility, audience perception, and digital reputation. Individuals discipline their speech, appearance, opinions, and behavior to maintain acceptance and avoid exclusion within online communities. Surveillance is thus internalized as self-regulation rather than imposed solely through external authority.

Anthropological Implications of Social Media

One of the most profound anthropological consequences of social media is the transformation of human relationality. Human beings are fundamentally relational creatures whose identities develop through interpersonal encounters, dialogue, mutual recognition, and communal participation. Traditionally, human relationships were grounded in physical presence, emotional depth, and sustained interpersonal engagement. However, the rise of digital communication has altered the structure and meaning of social interaction by shifting human relationships from embodied encounters to technologically mediated networks. Contemporary social media platforms prioritize speed, accessibility, and constant communication, thereby redefining relational existence through networked interaction. Individuals increasingly relate to others through messages, reactions, emojis, images, and digital content rather than through direct embodied presence. Relationships become organized around immediacy, visibility, and continuous connectivity. While digital communication expands opportunities for interaction across geographical boundaries, it often reduces interpersonal engagement to fragmented and surface-level exchanges. Scholars argue that social media culture privileges quantity of interaction over depth of relationship, producing networks of connection that may lack existential intimacy and genuine reciprocity (Turkle, 2021).

This transformation contributes to the decline of silence, contemplation, and presence within contemporary human experience. Traditional philosophical and spiritual traditions regarded silence and contemplation as essential dimensions of authentic selfhood and meaningful relationality. Silence creates space for reflection, listening, inwardness, and ethical openness to others. However, digital culture is characterized by constant stimulation, perpetual communication, and uninterrupted connectivity. Social media platforms encourage immediate reaction, continuous engagement, and endless consumption of information, thereby diminishing opportunities for contemplative existence. Byung-Chul Han argues that digital modernity destroys contemplative life by replacing reflective presence with accelerated communication and informational overload. Human beings increasingly experience reality through distraction and fragmented attention rather than sustained existential awareness.

Paradoxically, the expansion of digital connectivity has also intensified experiences of loneliness and isolation. Despite unprecedented opportunities for online interaction, many individuals report feelings of emotional disconnection, social anxiety, and existential emptiness. This condition may be described as digital loneliness amid hyperconnectivity. Social media often creates the appearance of community and belonging while weakening the depth of authentic interpersonal relationships. Online interactions can become performative and transactional, oriented toward visibility and validation rather than mutual presence and ethical encounter. Consequently, individuals may remain constantly connected yet profoundly isolated. Recent studies indicate that excessive social media use contributes to emotional fatigue, loneliness, and reduced psychological well-being, particularly among younger generations immersed in digitally mediated social environments (Odgers & Jensen, 2024). Anthropologically, this redefinition of relationality signifies a transition from communal and embodied forms of social existence toward technologically mediated modes of interaction. Human relationships increasingly operate through systems of visibility, algorithmic recommendation, and digital participation, thereby transforming the meaning of intimacy, friendship, and communal belonging in contemporary society.

The digital age has also produced significant transformations in the understanding of embodiment and human existence. Philosophical anthropology has traditionally emphasized the embodied nature of human life, recognizing the body as central to perception, relationality, and lived experience. Human beings encounter the world through bodily presence, sensory engagement, and interpersonal interaction. However, social media and digital technologies increasingly mediate existence through virtual representation rather than direct embodiment. One major consequence of this transformation is the phenomenon of disembodiment in digital culture. Digital environments allow individuals to interact without physical presence, thereby weakening the centrality of embodied experience in social relations. Communication increasingly occurs through screens, text, avatars, images, and virtual performances rather than face-to-face encounters. The digital self becomes detached from concrete bodily presence and reconstructed through symbolic representation. While virtual spaces create new opportunities for communication and identity experimentation, they also risk alienating individuals from embodied reality and lived interpersonal experience.

This condition is intensified by the treatment of the body as image and spectacle within social media culture. Platforms such as Instagram and TikTok privilege visual representation, encouraging individuals to present the body as an aesthetic object for public consumption and evaluation. Digital culture promotes idealized standards of beauty, attractiveness, fitness, and lifestyle that shape bodily self-perception and identity formation. Filters, editing tools, cosmetic enhancements, and curated visual performances transform the body into a project of continuous optimization and visibility. Philosophically, this reflects a shift from experiencing the body as lived subjectivity toward treating the body as a visible object within economies of attention and digital consumption. The body therefore becomes increasingly mediated through images and symbolic performances designed for recognition and validation. This process contributes to heightened self-consciousness, bodily anxiety, and dissatisfaction, particularly among young people exposed to unrealistic digital representations. Scholars note that social media intensifies bodily comparison and performative self-awareness by encouraging individuals to interpret their bodies through the gaze of digital audiences (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2022).

The rise of virtuality further transforms human experience by altering the relationship between reality, perception, and social existence. Virtual environments increasingly mediate work, education, relationships, entertainment, and identity formation. Human beings now inhabit hybrid

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realities in which physical and digital experiences continuously intersect. Virtuality allows individuals to transcend geographical limitations and participate in global networks of communication; however, it also blurs distinctions between reality and simulation. Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyper-reality becomes especially relevant here, as digital representations often appear more influential than direct lived experience itself. Anthropologically, the movement toward virtual existence signifies a profound transformation in human self-understanding. Human identity increasingly emerges through technologically mediated environments where embodiment is fragmented, aestheticized, and subordinated to digital visibility. Consequently, the digital age challenges traditional understandings of bodily presence, authenticity, and existential participation in the world.

The rise of social media and digital technologies has also transformed contemporary understandings of freedom, agency, and power. Digital culture often presents itself as a space of liberation, participation, and unlimited self-expression. Social media platforms provide individuals with opportunities to communicate globally, share opinions, construct identities, and access information. However, beneath this appearance of freedom lies a complex structure of technological and economic power that shapes behavior, desires, and social participation. One of the central anthropological concerns in digital society is the illusion of freedom in digital participation. Social media users frequently perceive themselves as autonomous agents freely expressing opinions and constructing identities online. Yet digital participation is often structured by platform architectures, algorithmic systems, and economic incentives that shape visibility and engagement. Byung-Chul Han argues that neoliberal digital culture transforms domination into voluntary participation. Individuals willingly expose themselves, generate data, and participate in systems of surveillance because digital engagement is experienced as freedom and self-expression rather than coercion. This creates a paradoxical condition in which individuals become active participants in their own regulation and exploitation.

Ethical and Philosophical Implications

One of the most pressing philosophical questions arising from digital culture concerns the possibility of authenticity within technologically mediated environments. Social media platforms encourage continuous self-presentation, performance, and visibility, raising concerns about whether authentic selfhood can survive in spaces structured by algorithms, audience expectations, and digital commodification. The digital self often appears fragmented, curated, and strategically constructed for recognition rather than grounded in genuine existential self-understanding. Consequently, contemporary digital culture challenges traditional philosophical assumptions concerning sincerity, inwardness, and personal authenticity.

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The question "Can authentic selfhood survive digital mediation?" reflects broader anxieties about the relationship between technology and human existence. Authenticity traditionally implies fidelity to one's true existence, moral integrity, and openness to genuine self-realization. However, social media environments frequently encourage individuals to adapt identity according to trends, metrics of popularity, and symbolic performance. The pressure to remain visible and relevant can transform identity into a calculated performance aimed at social approval rather than existential truth. Digital mediation therefore risks subordinating authentic existence to spectacle, branding, and algorithmic recognition. Nevertheless, authenticity in online environments should not be dismissed entirely as impossible. Digital platforms can also provide opportunities for self-expression, creativity, solidarity, and the articulation of marginalized identities. Individuals may use social media to communicate deeply personal experiences, form meaningful communities, and resist oppressive social structures. The ethical challenge lies not in rejecting digital communication altogether but in discerning whether technological mediation enhances or diminishes genuine human presence and self-understanding.

This debate may be illuminated through comparison with existentialist notions of selfhood. Existentialist philosophers such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Martin Heidegger, and Gabriel Marcel emphasized authenticity as a mode of existence grounded in freedom, responsibility, and self-awareness. For Heidegger, authentic existence requires confronting one's finite being rather than becoming absorbed in anonymous social conformity, what he calls the They. Similarly, Marcel emphasizes presence, fidelity, and interpersonal communion as essential dimensions of authentic human existence. Social media culture, however, often intensifies conformity through trends, performative expectations, and digital mass culture. From the ongoing research it is crystal that individuals risk losing themselves within systems of endless comparison and public visibility. From an existential perspective, authentic selfhood in digital culture would require resisting the reduction of identity to performance and cultivating reflective self-awareness, ethical responsibility, and meaningful relational engagement. Authenticity therefore becomes not the rejection of digital existence but the critical negotiation of technological participation in ways that preserve human interiority, freedom, and existential depth.

The digital age has also generated profound ethical concerns regarding human dignity and the reduction of persons to quantifiable data. Philosophical anthropology traditionally understands the human person as possessing intrinsic worth that transcends utility, economic productivity, or instrumental value. Human dignity is grounded in rationality, relationality, moral agency,

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and the capacity for self-transcendence. However, digital culture increasingly interprets human identity through systems of data extraction, algorithmic classification, and numerical evaluation. One of the most troubling dimensions of contemporary digital culture is the reduction of persons to data and metrics. Social media platforms transform human experiences, preferences, emotions, and interactions into measurable information that can be analyzed, predicted, and monetized. Individuals become visible through engagement statistics such as likes, shares, followers, and views. In this context, human worth risks becoming identified with digital popularity and algorithmic relevance. The complexity of personhood is reduced to patterns of data capable of generating economic value within systems of surveillance capitalism.

This reductionism raises serious ethical concerns regarding commodification. Under digital capitalism, personal identity increasingly functions as a marketable product. Social media users are encouraged to commodify appearance, personality, relationships, and emotions in exchange for visibility and recognition. Influencer culture exemplifies this transformation by turning everyday life into commercial content designed for consumption. Human identity becomes integrated into systems of branding, advertising, and economic competition, thereby weakening distinctions between personhood and commodity. The commodification of identity also intensifies psychological vulnerability because self-worth becomes dependent upon external metrics of validation. Individuals may begin to perceive themselves primarily through digital feedback and audience response rather than through intrinsic moral and existential value. Such conditions threaten the ethical foundations of human dignity by subordinating personhood to visibility, productivity, and technological evaluation.

Against this reductionism, it is necessary to affirm that human value transcends algorithmic visibility. The human person cannot be fully understood through data profiles, engagement metrics, or predictive systems because human existence possesses dimensions of mystery, freedom, creativity, and transcendence that exceed technological calculation. Emmanuel Levinas emphasizes that the human Other always surpasses conceptual reduction and demands ethical responsibility beyond instrumental logic. Similarly, Gabriel Marcel distinguishes between treating persons as problems to be analyzed and encountering them as mysteries to be lived and respected. An ethical philosophy of digital culture must therefore resist forms of technological reductionism that diminish human dignity. Human beings are not merely data-producing entities or consumers within digital economies; they remain embodied moral subjects capable of authentic relation, ethical responsibility, and transcendence beyond algorithmic systems.

Despite the challenges posed by digital culture, possibilities for resistance and rehumanization remain open. The dominance of visibility, surveillance, and performative identity does not entirely eliminate human freedom or ethical agency. Rather, the digital age calls for critical forms of resistance capable of recovering contemplation, relationality, and authentic human presence within technologically mediated societies. One important form of resistance is digital minimalism and contemplative resistance. Digital minimalism refers to the intentional limitation of technological consumption in order to preserve attention, interiority, and meaningful human experience. Philosophically, contemplative resistance involves reclaiming silence, reflection, and existential depth against the constant stimulation of digital culture. Byung-Chul Han argues that genuine freedom requires spaces of negativity, stillness, and withdrawal from the endless demands of productivity and connectivity. In a culture dominated by acceleration and visibility, silence itself becomes a form of ethical resistance. Rehumanization also requires reclaiming relationality and embodied presence. Human beings flourish through genuine interpersonal encounters grounded in empathy, dialogue, and ethical responsibility. Social media often fragments relationality by reducing communication to symbolic performance and digital consumption. Consequently, restoring authentic human connection involves reaffirming the importance of embodied interaction, attentive listening, and communal participation beyond virtual visibility. Philosophers such as Martin Buber emphasize the significance of dialogical relation, where authentic existence emerges through genuine encounter with the Other rather than through objectification or instrumental interaction.

The ethical reconstruction of digital culture therefore demands critical reflection on the values embedded within technological systems. Digital technologies are not neutral instruments; they shape perception, behavior, and social organization according to underlying economic and ideological interests. Ethical reconstruction requires promoting technological practices that prioritize human dignity, relational well-being, democratic participation, and psychological flourishing rather than surveillance, commodification, and manipulation. Such reconstruction also involves cultivating digital ethics grounded in responsibility, moderation, and critical awareness. Educational institutions, policymakers, religious communities, and cultural organizations all possess roles in shaping humane approaches to digital life. The goal is not technological rejection but the creation of digital environments that support authentic personhood, ethical coexistence, and meaningful human development.

Conclusion

This study has examined digital identity as a profound transformation of human selfhood within the contemporary culture of social media. Through an anthropological and critical-philosophical reading grounded in the thought of Byung-Chul Han, the paper has argued that social media platforms do not merely provide new channels of communication but fundamentally reshape the conditions under which identity is constructed, experienced, and recognized. The emergence of digitally mediated subjectivity reflects a transition from embodied and relational forms of selfhood toward identities increasingly defined by visibility, performance, algorithmic mediation, and continuous self-exposure.

The analysis demonstrated that digital culture operates within regimes of neoliberal subjectivity that encourage self-optimization, productivity, and performative authenticity. In this environment, the individual becomes both the producer and the commodity of digital capitalism, constantly curating and presenting the self for public validation through metrics of visibility such as likes, followers, and engagement. Consequently, identity is transformed into an ongoing project of exhibition and optimization, often accompanied by psychological exhaustion, fragmentation, and the erosion of contemplative interiority. The study further showed that social media contributes to the weakening of genuine alterity and dialogical encounter through algorithmic personalization and cultures of sameness, thereby reshaping not only personal identity but also the ethical structure of human relations. Within this context, the philosophy of Byung-Chul Han remains highly relevant for understanding the anthropology of social media and digital modernity. Han's analyses of the transparency society, the burnout society, the achievement subject, and the disappearance of the Other" provide a compelling conceptual framework for diagnosing the cultural and existential consequences of digital capitalism. His critique illuminates how regimes of hypervisibility and positivity transform freedom into self-exploitation and communication into exposure. More importantly, Han's thought reveals that the crisis of digital identity is not merely technological but anthropological, involving a deeper transformation in how human beings understand themselves, relate to others, and inhabit the world.

The future of the self in digital culture therefore lies within a tension between exposure and interiority. On one hand, technological mediation increasingly pushes individuals toward perpetual visibility and external validation; on the other hand, authentic selfhood still depends upon interior reflection, embodied presence, silence, and meaningful relationality. The challenge for contemporary philosophical anthropology is to articulate forms of digital existence that preserve human depth without rejecting technological participation altogether. A reconstructed understanding of the self must therefore balance connectivity with contemplation, visibility with opacity, and digital interaction with embodied ethical encounter. The question of digital identity is inseparable from the broader question of what it means to remain human in an age increasingly shaped by technological mediation.

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Rethinking Progress And Social Justice In The Philosophy Of Development

Abstract

In a time when Nigeria stands at the crossroads of broken dreams and emerging possibilities, the need to rethink what truly counts as progress and justice has never been more urgent. This paper explored the philosophy of development by asking hard questions about whose progress we are pursuing and at what cost. Moving beyond mere statistics and economic growth charts, it dug into the heart of what it means to live well together socially, politically, and morally. In a country where skyscrapers rise beside slums, and high-tech innovation thrives in the midst of hunger and poverty, development cannot simply be about GDP or infrastructure. The paper argued that any true philosophy of development must include a strong commitment to social justice where dignity, equality, and fairness are not optional ideals but foundational goals. Drawing on African communal values, as well as critical reflections from both Western and indigenous philosophies, this paper called for a new way of seeing development not as a race to modernity, but as a journey toward shared human flourishing. It questioned the inherited assumptions of past models and challenges Nigeria to create a future that honors both her cultural roots and the demands of justice. Finally, the paper is both a critique and a call to leaders, scholars, and citizens alike to stop mistaking movement for progress, and instead possibly build a nation where development encompasses justice.

Keywords: Development, progress, social justice, African communalism, humanism

Solomon Ojoka Ojomah, PhD
Federal University of Lafia
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3042-0714

Fidelis O. Ejegbavwo, PhD
Department of Philosophy, St Albert Institute, (An affiliate of University of Jos)
Fayit, Fadan-Kagoma, Kafanchan, Kaduna State, Nigeria.
drfidel12@gmail.com
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0458-8696

Corresponding Author's Email: sojomah@gmail.com

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Introduction

The philosophy of development is a broad and interdisciplinary field of inquiry that seeks to explore the meaning, purpose, and ethical foundations of human progress. The concept of development has long been based on a specific understanding of progress that prioritizes economic growth, industrial expansion, and technological advancement as the principal determinant of societal improvement. This conception evolved from the rationalism of the Enlightenment that was institutionalized through post-World War II modernization theory, its paradigm encompasses a linear trajectory of development in which societies advance from "traditional" to "modern" stages, climaxing in the industrialized economies of the Global

North. However, as global realities shift, critical voices have begun to question whether conventional measures of development such as Gross Domestic Product (GDP), industrial expansion, and technological innovation truly capture the essence of human flourishing. This paradigm of development has also came under sustained philosophical scrutiny for its reductionism, Eurocentrism, and inability to adequately address issues of inequality, cultural diversity, and ecological sustainability. In compliance with the aforementioned philosophical debate, it is therefore necessary to rethink what progress means and how it relates to the principles of social justice.

The concept of progress, in its narrow definition, tend to reduce human existence to a mere pursuit of material accumulation, overlooking the deeper moral, cultural, social, and environmental dimensions that constitute just and meaningful life. Philosophy of development, therefore, offers an avenue to interrogate these assumptions, question the narratives of modernity, and to propose new paradigms that place human dignity, equity, and justice at the center of developmental aspirations. From the historical viewpoint, the Enlightenment era gave birth to the idea of linear progress, suggesting that societies evolve from primitive to advanced stages through the application of reason, science, and industrialization. Thinkers such as Auguste Comte and G.W.F. Hegel viewed development as inevitable, tied to rationality and the unfolding of history (Badham 142). This Eurocentric narrative was one of the key determinant of the policies of colonization and modernization, where development was equated with Westernization and its models of state-building, economic structures, and cultural practices. In the post-colonial era, development was redefined largely in terms of economic growth, with institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund promoting industrialization, liberalization, and globalization as universal pathways to prosperity. Yet, these models often ignored the social realities of inequality, environmental degradation, cultural identity, and political marginalization in many parts of the Global South. Consequently, progress was achieved for some, but at the expense of others a reality that demands critical rethinking. To rethink progress is to confront the ethical questions that underlie development (Paupp 165). What does it mean for a society to progress? Is progress merely technological advancement and capital accumulation, or does it entail something deeper, such as the well-being of citizens, fairness in distribution of resources, preservation of the environment, and respect for human rights? The philosophy of development insists that any genuine conception of progress must be grounded in social justice. Justice, in this context, transcends legal frameworks to embody fairness, inclusivity, and dignity for all people, particularly the marginalized. Without justice, progress remains lopsided, benefiting the few while entrenching poverty, exclusion, and exploitation for the many. To this end, main argument of this essay is that rethinking progress in the philosophy of development necessarily requires a paradigmatic modification from growth-based system to a justice-oriented, pluralistic, and relational understanding of human flourishing.

Furthermore, rethinking progress through the lens of social justice necessitates a holistic understanding of human life. It means moving beyond reductionist economic metrics to embrace multidimensional approaches such as Amartya Sen's capability approach, which defines development as the expansion of freedoms and opportunities for individuals to live lives they value. It means grappling with ecological justice, recognizing that the pursuit of growth must not destroy the planet for future generations. It also means addressing global inequalities, where the prosperity of some nations is often built upon the underdevelopment of others. This reorientation requires philosophy to serve as both a critical and constructive discipline: critiquing dominant paradigms while simultaneously envisioning alternative frameworks that uphold the values of solidarity, justice, and shared humanity. In today's world, marked by deepening inequality, climate change, migration crises, and cultural conflicts, the urgency of this philosophical inquiry cannot be overstated. The failures of conventional development paradigms evident in widening wealth gaps, the erosion of communal life, and ecological collapse underscore the need for a new vision of progress that is both ethical and sustainable.

Rethinking progress and social justice in the context of the philosophy of development is not merely an academic exercise; it is a call to reimagine the foundations of human coexistence, to question structures of domination, and to advocate for a more humane world order. It challenges policymakers, scholars, and citizens alike to embrace a vision of development that does not prioritize profit over people, nor power over justice, but instead seeks a balance where human dignity and equity form the bedrock of progress. Thus, the philosophy of development becomes an indispensable tool for examining the contradictions of our present order and for charting a future in which progress is not measured solely by economic indicators but by the extent to which justice, fairness, and human well-being are realized in society. This essay critically explore how rethinking progress in light of social justice transforms our understanding of development, providing fresh insights into the ethical responsibilities of states, institutions, and individuals in the pursuit of a just and equitable world. It is argued in this essay that rethinking progress in the philosophy of development essentially entails a paradigmatic alteration from growth-based metrics to a justice-oriented, pluralistic, and relational understanding of human flourishing. In paying attention to the critical development theory, the capability approach, and African philosophical traditions, this essay critically examines the drawbacks of dominant development paradigms and proposes an alternative framework grounded in social justice, cultural pluralism, and ethical responsibility.

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Historical Background of Development and Progress

The history of the concepts of progress and development are inherent in philosophical, economic, and political thought, the two concept are often used interchangeably. Generally, development is concerned with the structural transformation of societies economically, socially, and politically, development' is the means whereby the goal of universal human improvement can be attained (Cowen & Shenton, 3). Progress on the other hand implies a normative improvement in human conditions such as freedom, justice, and well-being. Important to the concept of progress is the notion of order, the condition of all Progress is order; Progress is always the object of Order (Cowen & Shenton, 26). The historical trajectory of these concepts reveals shifting paradigms influenced by cultural values, colonial encounters, and global socio-economic dynamics. In antiquity, progress was often tied to moral and civic virtue.

The Greeks, particularly Aristotle, linked development to the idea of *eudaimonia* human flourishing achieved through virtue and rational living. In Politics, Aristotle stressed that the polis exists for "the sake of the good life" (Aristotle, 29). Development here was not economic growth, but the cultivation of human potential within a just society. Similarly, Roman thought, exemplified in Cicero's works, emphasized civic responsibility and justice as the basis for societal advancement. The Enlightenment marked a decisive shift in the conceptualization of progress. Thinkers such as Francis Bacon and René Descartes promoted rationality, science, and human mastery over nature as the basis of advancement.

The idea of development was expressed in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, specifically in his 1784 essay titled *Idea for a universal history with cosmopolitan intent.* The contents of this essay has been used to show the extent to which eighteenth-century thinking continues to find its way into official and quasi-official development doctrine. Special emphasis has been laid upon Kant's view expressed in the destitution into which human beings plunge each other. Primarily Kant's idea of development has been conceived as the positive source of development inherent in what Kant hoped would be the 'inevitable escape' from destitution (Cowen & Shenton, x).However, the counterpoint to development as encapsulated in the concept of underdevelopment, arose at the very moment when the positive doctrine of development was getting established. Cardinal Newman in his 1845 Essay titled *On the Development of Christian Doctrine* presented this dimension in the theory of development by dealing with the criteria of development embedded in the question of whether it was possible to evaluate phenomena of development. Even though his attention was more on Christian doctrine, in his approach by which he established the difference between corrupt and true development bears the potency of the contemporary meanings of development and underdevelopment: "Newman raised the distinction between the internal and external of development which, when transposed to the time and place of capitalist development, lies at the heart of underdevelopment theory" (Cowen & Shenton, xi). In his later work in 1878, titled *Grammar of Ascent*, Newman tendered his appreciation on how the evaluation of development served as restriction to its scope and as such extended the meaning of development to encompass the interior of development as that which gave limitation to the doctrine rather than simply the base of the belief of the subject to the external authority of the conscience.

Condorcet, in his Sketch for a Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind, envisioned history as a linear march toward reason, equality, and liberty (Condorcet, 5). This idea of continuous improvement through reason and science laid the foundation for modern conceptions of progress. However, such a Eurocentric vision often ignored cultural diversity and justified colonialism under the guise of "civilizing missions" (Escobar, 22).

In France, the concept of development in the modern era was has its origin in the works of Saint-Simonians and Auguste Comte in early nineteenth-century who articulated development doctrine as a response to what they described as the errors of the received idea of progress. Indubitably, the idea of development was entrenched in the older idea of progress that there was an unfolding of potential and that the new was a purposeful improvement on the old. In the modern era, development doctrine that was obtainable was no longer possible to treat progress and development as if they were substitutes for one another. Even though progress was what qualified development in this perception, it was not its substitute (Cowen & Shenton, ix). Another spectacular view of development in the 19th century is its link to industrialization and economic growth. Economists like Adam Smith, in The Wealth of Nations, argued that the division of labor and market expansion would generate prosperity and elevate human societies (Smith, 13). Karl Marx, however, critiqued capitalist development, arguing that while it unleashed productive capacities, it also entrenched class inequalities and alienation (Marx, 133). For Marx, true progress lay in the eventual emancipation of workers from exploitative social relations.

In the mid-20th century, after World War II, development became institutionalized as a global project. The establishment of the Bretton Woods institutions (the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank) framed development as economic modernization, largely equated with GDP growth and industrialization. President Harry Truman's 1949 inaugural address marked a watershed, as he described vast regions of the world as "underdeveloped" and in need of assistance from advanced nations (Rist, 71). This inaugurated what many scholars call the "development age," where progress was measured in terms of Western-style modernization. Critiques soon followed, especially from dependency theorists such as Andre Gunder Frank, who argued that development in the Global North often created under development in the South through exploitative economic structures (Frank, 26).

Similarly, Arturo Escobar critiqued the discourse of development as a Western construct that marginalized local knowledge systems and reinforced global inequalities (Escobar, 44). This opened debates on whether development should be redefined in terms of social justice, sustainability, and cultural autonomy rather than merely economic growth. In recent decades, the United Nations has promoted a broader view of development through frameworks such as the Human Development Index (HDI) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Inspired by Amartya Sen's Development as Freedom, development is increasingly understood as the expansion of human capabilities and choices rather than mere material progress (Sen, 36).

This marks a historical turn from earlier Eurocentric and growth-centered paradigms to a more holistic approach that emphasizes justice, equity, and sustainability. Thus, the historical background of development and progress reveals a complex evolution from ancient ethical ideals, Enlightenment rationalism, and industrial modernization, to critiques of global inequality and contemporary calls for inclusive, just, and sustainable development. The challenge today is not only to rethink what counts as progress but also to ensure that development promotes justice and dignity for all peoples.

Rethinking Progress

The concept of progress has long been associated with improvement, growth, and the advancement of human societies. Traditionally, it has been defined in terms of material expansion, technological innovation, and economic growth. However, contemporary debates in philosophy, development studies, and social theory have questioned whether this conventional view adequately addresses the deeper needs of humanity. Rethinking progress requires examining its historical limitations and envisioning a more just, sustainable, and inclusive model of human flourishing. The Enlightenment era shaped the dominant narrative of progress as a linear movement from ignorance to knowledge, from poverty to wealth, and from oppression to freedom. For there to be any substantial rethinking of progress, one must give priority to social justice as the core of progress. Development cannot be considered worth its salt if it produces economic growth while propagating inequality and exclusion. The theory of justice espoused by John Rawls presents a foundational template for addressing distributive inequality. Rawls' difference principle opined that inequalities are only justified if they benefit the least privileged members of society (Rawls 83). This principle antithetical development prototypes that tolerate inequality as an indispensable consequence of growth. It is worth noting that distributive justice alone is insufficient criterion for determining progress and development. It is on this note that Iris Marion Young contends that justice must also pay attention to structures of oppression and exclusion (Young 39). Marginalized groups frequently face systemic barriers that resolving through redistribution alone may not be possible.

African philosophy enriches this discourse on development and progress by accentuating relational justice. Mbiti's communal ontology presupposes that injustice is not simply a matter of unequal distribution but a disruption of social relationships. Mbiti's account of African cosmology lay emphasis on the interconnectedness of humans, nature, and the spiritual realm as an important elements of progress and progress (Mbiti 67). Likewise, Gyekye's communitarianism presents the importance of mutual responsibility and social harmony. It is based on this that he contends that good life involves both personal development and active participation in the community (Gyekye 121). Accordingly, social justice in development and progress ought to integrate distribution, recognition, and inclusion, ensuring that all individuals have both the resources and the dignity necessary for flourishing.

Thinkers such as Condorcet envisioned human history as an inevitable trajectory toward rationality and equality (Condorcet, 5). Similarly, positivist philosophers like Auguste Comte saw progress as the gradual advancement of science and reason. While these views inspired confidence in modernization, they often overlooked cultural diversity and the costs of industrialization, colonization, and environmental exploitation. In the twentieth century, progress became largely synonymous with economic growth.

The post-World War II development agenda measured progress through Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and industrial output, assuming that economic modernization would automatically translate into social well-being (Rist, 71). However, this growth-centered paradigm has been criticized for ignoring issues of inequality, ecological degradation, and social justice. African philosophers focus on this critique by uncovering the cultural and epistemological assumptions embedded in GDP-based models. Kwasi Wiredu contends that development template smuggled from the West often fail to give adequate attention to indigenous notions of value and social life. GDP reflects a commodified ontology that lessens human existence to mere economic productivity, thereby abandoning relational and moral dimensions of well-being (Wiredu 136). In a similar pattern, Kwame Gyekye accentuates that individual well-being cannot be understood in independent of the community. In his moderate communitarianism theory, Gyekye contends that the flourishing of the individual is intrinsically connected to the flourishing of the community (Gyekye 101). From this perspective, the parameter for measuring progress and development cannot be wealth but necessarily encompasses social harmony, moral development, and communal solidarity. To this end, the critique of GDP reveals a profound philosophical issue that is the reduction of progress and development to quantifiable economic indicators that obfuscates the multidimensional nature of human well-being. For example, dependency theorists like Andre Gunder Frank argued that the so-called progress of industrial nations often relied on the underdevelopment of poorer countries through exploitative economic structures (Frank, 26).

To rethink progress, scholars and policymakers have gradually highlighted human-centered approaches. Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* argued that progress should not be measured solely by wealth but by the expansion of human capabilities the freedom of individuals to pursue lives, they value (Sen, 36). This capability approach redefines development as the expansion of substantive freedoms, the real opportunities individuals have to lead lives they value (Sen 18). This changes the evaluative emphasis from income to agency, from commodities to functioning. It is this approach that influenced the creation of the Human Development Index (HDI), which evaluates progress through indicators like education, health, and life expectancy, not just income. Similarly, Martha Nussbaum's capabilities approach highlights the importance of dignity, equality, and justice as core elements of progress (Nussbaum, 33). Another dimension of rethinking progress comes from environmental and sustainability concerns. The industrial model of progress has contributed to climate change, biodiversity loss, and environmental crises that threaten human survival. As Arturo Escobar notes, the Western model of progress assumes endless growth, which is fundamentally incompatible with ecological limits (Escobar, 44).

In response, the concept of sustainable development popularized by the 1987 Brundtland Report seeks to balance economic growth with ecological preservation and intergenerational justice. This shift recognizes that true progress cannot be achieved at the expense of the planet or future generations. Social justice also plays a central role in reimagining progress. Philosophers like Nancy Fraser argue that progress must address both redistribution (economic justice) and recognition (cultural and social inclusion) (Fraser, 44). This means moving beyond material prosperity to tackle systemic inequalities of race, gender, class, and global power.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, reflect this broader vision by linking poverty eradication with equality, environmental sustainability, and peace. Thus, rethinking progress entails moving away from narrow, Eurocentric, and purely economic definitions. It requires integrating freedom, justice, sustainability, and human dignity into how societies evaluate advancement. In this sense, progress is not merely about having more, but about being more cultivating societies where all individuals can thrive within ecological and social harmony.

Social Justice and Development

Historically, the concept of development has been associated with economic growth, industrial advancement, and technological modernization.

Conversely, in recent decades, scholars and policymakers have recognized the limitation of this approach, that development cannot be understood exclusively through material prosperity. It is a fundamental truism that development necessarily entails the inclusion of social justice as a tool that ensures fairness, equity, and dignity for all members of society. Development devoid of justice risks becoming exploitative, benefiting a few whiles marginalizing the many. Social justice and development are deeply connected, with the former serving as both a condition and a goal of the latter. At its core, social justice refers to the fair distribution of resources, opportunities, and privileges in society. It emphasizes equality, human rights, and the protection of marginalized groups. Development, on the other hand, is not merely an increase in GDP but a holistic process that enhances human capabilities, reduces inequalities, and promotes collective well-being (Sen, 18).

Considering the importance of social justice as shown above, any development agenda that ignores social justice is incomplete and unsustainable. The connection between social justice and development is evident in Amartya Sen's capability approach, which shifts the focus of development from economic growth to human freedom. Sen argues that development must expand people's real freedoms the ability to live the kind of life they value (Sen, 36). In this structure, social justice guarantees that these freedoms transcend the privileged few but extend to all, including women, minorities, and the poor. A society may achieve economic prosperity, but if vast populations remain excluded from quality education, healthcare, and political participation, development remains unjust and partial.

Correspondingly, the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) highlight the inseparability of justice and development. Goals such as eradicating poverty, reducing inequality, promoting gender equality, and ensuring peace and justice (UN 2020) demonstrate that justice is not a separate moral aspiration but a practical necessity for sustainable progress. A society that perpetuates structural injustice such as unequal access to land, discriminatory laws, or gender-based violence undermines its own prospects for stability and inclusive growth.

Moreover, it very important to contend that without social justice, development creates new forms of exclusion. For example, globalization has enabled technological and financial growth but has also deepened inequality between the Global North and the Global South (Pogge, 32). In many developing nations, rapid economic reforms have enriched elites while displacing poor communities, leading to social unrest and widening disparities. This underscores the necessity of embedding justice within development policy to ensure equitable outcomes. Social justice also has a transformative dimension: it empowers marginalized voices and fosters participatory governance. As John Rawls maintains, a just society is one in which inequalities are arranged to benefit the least advantaged (Rawls, 53).

Applying this principle to development means ensuring that infrastructure projects, social programs, and economic policies directly uplift disadvantaged groups rather than exacerbate their marginalization. Social justice and development are mutually reinforcing. Development without justice risks entrenching inequality, while justice without development may lack the material capacity to sustain dignity and equity. The philosophy of development, therefore, must embrace social justice as its foundation, ensuring that growth is inclusive, humane, and sustainable. Only then can development fulfill its ultimate aim: the flourishing of all people in society.

Toward a New Paradigm of Development

The contemporary discourse on development has undergone substantial transformations, transcending from the earlier conceptions that equated progress primarily with economic growth, industrialization, and modernization. The traditional paradigm, which prioritized Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and industrial output as measures of success, has increasingly been challenged for its inability to capture the multidimensional realities of human well-being, justice, and sustainability. In response, scholars and policymakers have called for a new paradigm of development one that rethinks progress in terms of inclusivity, equity, and ecological balance.

This paradigm shift is fundamentally in two dimensions; theoretical and practical, as it pays attention to urgent global challenges such as inequality, climate change, and social injustice. One of the sturdiest critiques of the old paradigm is its reductionist approach. Development was limited to GDP parameters of growth, but such indicators neglect the lived experiences of marginalized populations and fail to address disparities in wealth and opportunity (Sen, 18). Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom* profoundly redefined development by proposing that it should be understood in terms of the expansion of human capabilities and freedoms rather than merely material prosperity. This capability approach has influenced international frameworks like the United Nations Development Programmer's Human Development Index (HDI), which combines income, education, and health as measures of progress.

The new paradigm accentuates social justice as a core pillar. Nancy Fraser argues that justice in the 21st century cannot be restricted to redistribution of resources but must also address recognition of marginalized identities and ensure participatory parity (Fraser, 73). In this sense, development is not only about lifting people out of poverty but also about dismantling structural inequalities based on gender, race, ethnicity, and other social markers. This is particularly relevant in contexts like sub-Saharan Africa, where colonial legacies, poor governance, and global economic structures continue to perpetuate underdevelopment.

Furthermore, sustainability has become essential to the rethinking of development. The Brundtland Report of 1987 first popularized the concept of sustainable development as development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (World Commission on Environment and Development, 43). Today, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reflect a more holistic vision that integrates social inclusion, environmental stewardship, and economic growth. For example, Goal 10 calls for reduced inequalities, while Goal 13 urges urgent action against climate change highlighting the inseparability of social justice and environmental sustainability.

Another important aspect of the new paradigm is the emphasis on local agency and participatory development. Arturo Escobar criticizes the dominance of Western models of development imposed on the Global South, describing it as a "discourse of domination" (Escobar, 54). He calls for alternatives rooted in local knowledge systems and cultural values. Such an approach recognizes the diversity of development paths and resists the homogenization of progress according to Western standards. By valuing indigenous practices and community-based approaches, development can be more sustainable, inclusive, and context-sensitive. The new paradigm of development moves away from narrow economic determinism to embrace a multidimensional understanding of human flourishing. It integrates freedom, justice, sustainability, and cultural diversity as central to the meaning of progress. By doing so, it challenges us to rethink not only how we measure development but also how we pursue it in practice. Such a shift is crucial in ensuring that development serves all people, especially the marginalized, while safeguarding the ecological systems upon which future generations depend.

Conclusion

The philosophy of development that emphasizes rethinking progress and social justice invites a fundamental shift in how societies conceptualize and pursue human flourishing. For decades, development was largely equated with economic growth, industrial advancement, and material accumulation. However, this narrow understanding has proven inadequate in addressing the deep inequalities, cultural disruptions, and ecological damages that accompany purely growth-driven paradigms. To truly advance human well-being, development must be reimagined as a multidimensional process that integrates moral values, social justice, inclusivity, and environmental sustainability. This requires moving beyond the simplistic idea of development as an economic phenomenon and recognizing it as a deeply ethical and philosophical undertaking that concerns the dignity of the human person and the collective good of society.

Rethinking progress entails understanding that development cannot be reduced to GDP figures or infrastructural expansion. While economic growth is important, it becomes hollow if it fails to address poverty, unemployment, gender inequality, and social exclusion. The philosophy of development insists that authentic progress is measured by the extent to which individuals and communities are empowered to lead meaningful lives. As Amartya Sen's capability approach highlights, development must enhance people's real freedoms their ability to choose and act in ways that enrich their existence. In this sense, progress is not just about wealth accumulation but about expanding opportunities for education, healthcare, political participation, and cultural expression. It is about creating societies where every human being has the space to actualize their potential without systemic barriers.

Equally, the integration of social justice into the discourse on development underscores the moral obligation to correct structural imbalances that perpetuate inequality. Social justice calls attention to the plight of marginalized groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, rural populations, and the urban poor, who are often left behind in conventional development strategies. Justice requires that development policies ensure fair distribution of resources, equal opportunities, and respect for human rights. It means dismantling oppressive structures that breed discrimination and ensuring that the voices of the powerless are included in decision-making.

In this light, social justice is not an optional supplement to development but a central principle that gives meaning to progress itself. Moreover, rethinking progress and justice challenges us to embrace ecological consciousness. True development cannot be achieved at the expense of environmental degradation, for the destruction of the earth's ecosystems ultimately undermines human survival. Sustainable development therefore integrates economic advancement with ecological stewardship, ensuring that current generations meet their needs without compromising the ability of future generations to do the same. Here, justice is extended across time, linking present and future humanity in a shared moral responsibility.

The philosophy of development as rethought through progress and social justice calls for a holistic paradigm one that sees individual's not merely as economic agents but as beings of dignity, culture, and rights. It urges societies to adopt policies that are people-centered, inclusive, participatory, and sustainable. Such a paradigm offers the possibility of a more humane world where development is not the privilege of a few but the shared heritage of all. As a moral project, development must be pursued with fairness, compassion, and wisdom, recognizing that genuine progress is achieved not when the strongest thrive at the expense of the weakest, but when every person, regardless of status, has the opportunity to live a life of dignity and fulfillment.

Thus, the task of rethinking development is not merely academic but practical and urgent. It demands intellectual humility, ethical sensitivity, and political courage. It requires leaders, policymakers, scholars, and citizens to move beyond entrenched paradigms and embrace transformative approaches that prioritize justice and sustainability. Only then can development truly fulfill its promise: to advance the good of all

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humanity, grounded in fairness, equality, and respect for the sanctity of life.

By integrating insights from African philosophy, particularly the works of Kwasi Wiredu, Kwame Gyekye, and John Mbiti, this essay has demonstrated the importance of relationality, community, and ethical responsibility in redefining progress. Finally, progress must be understood not as the accumulation of wealth but as the expansion of equitable, meaningful, and sustainable human possibilities. Social justice is not an optional addition to development; it is its very foundation.

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The Metaphysics of Ancestral Spirits in Nso Cosmology

Abstract

The Nso people of Cameroon maintain a distinctive worldview in which ancestral spirits, known as Nkfe or Vibai, play a central metaphysical role. These spirits are believed to possess powers that can either benefit or harm the living, and their presence is tied to sacred spaces such as the fon's palace, ancestral shrines, and forests. This article critically examined the metaphysical dimensions of ancestral spirits in Nso cosmology, exploring how they embody a relational ontology that situates being within continuity across past, present, and future generations. Adopting a hermeneutical method, the study drew on African philosophical thought and ethnographic accounts to interpret the ontological status of ancestral spirits and their socio-moral significance. The analysis demonstrated that, within Nso cosmology, ancestors are considered ontologically real as "living dead" who mediate between divine and human realms, reinforcing communal identity, and serving as moral exemplars. Their metaphysical presence shapes socio-moral behaviour, embedding metaphysics within a framework of interconnectedness and communal responsibility. The Nso experience illustrated that ancestral spirits are not merely venerated figures of the past but active participants in contemporary life. This study contributed to African philosophy by highlighting the metaphysical traditions of the Nso people and offering insights into the nature of being, continuity, and communal identity.

Keywords: Nso cosmology, ancestral spirit, African metaphysics, relational ontology, communal identity, Cameroon.

Judith Ngihbi, PhD
Department of Philosophy, Catholic Institute of West Africa
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6994-2133

Budzee Appolonia Dzelabvem
Department of Communication, Catholic Institute of West Africa
Port Harcourt, Rivers State, Nigeria
ORCID: https://orcid.org/0009-0006-5359-692x
appobudzee@gmail.com

Corresponding Author's Email:
mambujudith@gmail.com

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Introduction

The Banso are a Bantu-speaking community in western Cameroon. For many generations, agriculture and village dwellings have been sustained by the rich soils and undulating hills of the mountainous regions that make up their country. Due to long-standing interactions and shared ancestral customs, the Banso are a part of the larger cultural cluster of kindred communities in the Bamenda Foothills that share ethnic and cultural affinities. In African philosophy, the philosophical discussion of ancestor spirits holds a prominent position. The ancestors are ontologically real beings whose presence influences the community's moral, social, and spiritual fabric; they are not just symbolic figures. According to Mbiti (1990), they are the "living dead," people who stay involved in the concerns of the living and act as a mediator between the divine and humanity. Their everyday lives revolve around the idea of ancestor spirits, which is central to their philosophy. Ancestral spirits, according to the Nso people, are the spirits of their departed ancestors who still remain in the spiritual world and communicate with the living.

A particularly rich background for investigating the metaphysics of ancestor spirit is offered by the Nso people of Cameroon, who live in the Northwest Region. Their cosmology is firmly rooted on ancestral reverence, where the ontological presence of ancestors is affirmed through rituals, oral traditions, and group activities. The importance of ancestor rites in Nso society is postulated by Chem Langhëë (1995), who points out that they are metaphysical affirmations of continuity between generations rather than merely cultural acts. Moreover, Ngoh (2001) places these customs in the context of Cameroon's larger historical development. Despite colonial and postcolonial disturbances, he hypothesized that they are robust. However, the structure of reality that represents continuity between the past, present, and future is inextricably linked to the ancestral spirits.

Ancestral spirits are respected and adored in Nso metaphysics for their protection, knowledge, and direction. They are thought to have spiritual authority and powers that have a variety of effects on their descendants' life. Ancestral spirits are thought to be able to provide blessings, wealth, and good fortune, but they may also bring disaster, illness, and death if they are not properly appeased or if the descendants abandon the right way. The Nso people's conception of ancestor spirits is closely linked to their cosmology, which views the world as a complex network of connections between the material and spiritual. From this perspective, ancestral spirits act as go-betweens for the living and the Supreme Being, conveying the needs and worries of the latter to the former.

Understanding Ancestral Spirits in Nso Culture

The Nso folklore holds that ancestral spirits actively guide and safeguard their descendants, frequently thought of as a link between the material and spiritual realms. Depending on how they are revered and venerated, ancestral spirits are believed to have the ability to affect the living and bring either good or bad luck. The Nso people believe that preserving positive ties with their ancestors is essential to guaranteeing the success and well-being of the family and community.

Ancestral spirits are honored in Nso through rituals and offerings, which could involve presenting food and drink, pouring libations, or carrying out certain rituals to please the ancestors. The Nso people expect that these actions can enable them to access the blessings, wisdom, and direction of their ancestors. Additionally, it is believed that ancestor spirits can interact with the living through a variety of channels, including visions, dreams, and divination. This enables the living to ask their ancestors for protection, knowledge, and guidance. According to Nso tradition, ancestral spirits are the spirits of departed ancestors who live on in the afterlife. They are believed to have authority and

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spiritual abilities that affect their descendants' lives.

Although God looms so large in Nso life and metaphysics, the belief is that humans can only reach him through multiple intermediaries-ancestral spirits and various classes of deities associated with specific mundane objects, places, and phenomena. Black ants, known as "*vilii*," and white ants, known as "*vise'*," represent the ancestors' contact with the living. In Nso, this metaphysical metamorphosis is cosmologically acknowledged in the interpretation and evaluation of the rite's outcomes. While white ants consume the doorstep plank that blood pours on during sacrifice and thereby participate in the sacrifices, black ants come to taste the blood after it falls to the ground. This supports Nso's cosmology's metaphysical connection between the living, the living-dead, and the gods (Nsamenang, 1992, p. 90).

Moreso, to Nso culture, ancestral spirits are the spirits of departed ancestors who live on in the afterlife (Mzeka, 1980). They are believed to have spiritual authority and powers that affect their descendants' lives (Nsamenang, 2006). Ancestral spirits are said to live in a spiritual world outside from the material world, yet they are still related to and able to communicate with the living, according to Nso cosmology (Fisiy & Geschiere, 1993). They can be either good or bad based on how the living treat them (Mbiti, 1969); thus, they the ancestral spirits are said to bring blessings, protection, and direction if the living honor them and make sacrifices to them (Wiredu, 2004). According to the cosmic beliefs of the Nso people, as described by Taa woo Kuinseh, who helped Taa woo Faanjang perform *ntaḍri* rituals in the Faanjang compound, the living are compelled, by their religious practices, to make sacrifices in order to maintain that spiritual bond for their safety and their continued existence (Fonyuy, 2022, p. 7). Ancestral spirits are also believed to have a deep awareness and understanding of the natural and spiritual worlds; therefore, often consulted for guidance and wisdom (Nsamenang, 2006). According to Mzeka, ancestral spirits are seen as the custodians of traditional knowledge and cultural values, playing an important role in maintaining social order and promoting community cohesion (Mzeka, 1980). An ancestor is not only revered after death, but is one who has left a legacy for their progeny. During their lifetime, an ancestor may have been a soldier or warrior and be remembered for traits like courage, bravery, and fearlessness. They may also be remembered for traits like a distinctive physique, strong physical power, or a personality that exudes energy, high endurance that could be considered supernatural or distinctive. Throughout their lives, the family and community may have relied on an ancestor with these qualities for safeguarding, safety, and security, or for ensuring the protection of the family or community. Every compound featured a specific sacrifice (*chu*) and a hallowed site of worship *(kire' ke nyuy)*. The leader of the lineage had secular authority and, when necessary, took on the job of a priest. He

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later served as a go-between for God and his lineage's members. When someone became gravely ill, when a child was born, when there was a protracted drought, and when crops were planted or harvested, he carried out sacrifices. Thanking God for his gifts and appeasing his wrath were the two purposes of sacrifice (Fonyuy, 2022, p.4).

The Role of Ancestral Spirits in Nso Cosmology and Spirituality

In Africa and Nso spirituality, ancestry is more than just those who have passed into eternity; it is the heavenly means by which life itself is passed down. In order to maintain continuity and ties between generations, physical and spiritual characteristics are transmitted through human ancestors. Humans incorporate divine qualities from the Creator, the ultimate ancestor of all spirits, just as they inherit bodily characteristics, abilities, skills and personality traits from their forebears.

In Nso cosmology, the function of the living is to commemorate and remember departed ancestors, who are seen to have a significant impact on their descendants' lives. The foundation of this practice is the belief that ancestors still remain alive and active in a spiritual form, affecting the living and providing blessings, protection, and guidance. According to Kashim Ibrahim Tala's theory in Orature, "incantations are formulas with a magical orientation." They are full of profoundly mythopoetic imagery and supernatural abilities. They are used to curse criminals, fend off evil, summon evil onto adversaries, and flaunt one's individuality (Kashim, 1999, p.52).

Ancestors occupy a sacred zone between the divine and the living in Nso cosmology. As guardians and counselors to their offspring, they are seen as intermediaries with the power to affect the material world. Ties between the humans and their ancestors are preserved by cultivating a strong sense of connectedness to one's lineage across generations. The stronger the connection, the more effective or holier the ancestor is perceived to be. Ancestors are revered because of their biological and spiritual influence on the lives of the living. Therefore, paying respect by forebears is a recognition of the Creator's role in sustaining life and divinity via human ancestry

In Nso cosmology, the ancestrial spirits act as a bridge between the divine and the living. They return to the society with wisdom after communicating human concerns to higher spiritual forces. The Nso people consider *Nyuy*, to be the ultimate God and the universe's creator; thus, *Nyuy* created the planet and the first humans, *Le'* and *Njing* (Nkwi, 1987). Le' and Njing are important characters in Nso mythology who are fundamental to the genesis narrative. According to Nso oral traditions, *Le' and Njing* are regarded as the first humans made by the supreme god *Nyuy*. *Njing*, whom *Nyuy* created to be the mother of humanity, is frequently portrayed as the first woman. She is connected to the soil, childbirth, and fertility. On the one hand, *Njing* was tasked with maintaining the fertility of the soil and taking care of it. Conversely, *Le'* is frequently portrayed as *Nyuy's* creation of the first man and the father of humanity. He is known for his bravery, strength, and leadership. For Nkwi, *Le'* was tasked with defending and sustaining humanity (Nkwi, 1987).

Njing and Le' were formed by *Nyuy*, who put them in the world to take care of it and add people to it. The Nso people were finally formed by the growth and multiplication of *Njing and Le's* offspring. But in Nso mythology, *Le'* and *Njing* are important characters that symbolize the basis of human civilization. They represent the ideals and qualities that are significant to the Nso people, including duty, strength, and fertility. The Nso people are reminded of their ties to the natural environment and their ancestors through the roles of *Njing and Le'* (Kaberry, 1952). The Nso people's respect for *Njing* and *Le'* is shown in a number of cultural customs; for instance, women are obliged to perform rituals and make sacrifices to *Njing* in order to obtain her protection and blessings during delivery and childrearing. In the same vein, males may offer sacrifices and carry out rituals in order to seek *Leh's* support and direction in their day-to-day activities. The earthly embodiment of *Nyuy* is thought to be the Fon (king) of Nso. He is essential to preserving harmony and balance in the cosmos (Diduk, 1992).

The Nso Palace is therefore a hallowed site of worship and a representation of the temporal and spiritual might of the *Fon* (king). The *Ngai* (meeting house of regulating organizations), the *vikiy Nto san* (royal wives' apartments), and the *Shuufaay* (lineage halls) encircle the central courtyard, or *kibuh*. The Fon's role as axis mundi is made tangible by this centripetal arrangement. Commoners have access to outer precincts, whereas *ve wongi* (titled nobles) and *vibai* (regulatory societies) have access to interior chambers. The power hierarchy and ritual purity necessary to approach the Fon are carried out via the transition from profane to sacred place. The *kavah* (throne stool) carved as a double gong, signifies the Fon's dual role as judge and priest. The two chambers represent hearing both sides before judgment, while the gong form evokes the voice of ancestors. Only the Fon may sit on it, marking exclusive sovereignty. Leopard and Python, motifs found on royal staffs, stools, and door frames carry profound significance. The leopard denotes martial prowess and solitary authority; the python symbolizes wisdom, fertility, and the earth's regenerative power. Together they articulate balanced kingship: force tempered by prudence. The *Boom* (Royal Cap), a beaded conical cap with buffalo and spider motifs is another royal symbol. The buffalo indexes strength and sacrifice while the spider *ngam* indexes wisdom and the weaving of society. The Fon's legitimacy and metaphysical bond with *Nyuy* are publicly affirmed when they wear *Ndzev*. The Fon's appearance or demise was announced by the *ngem* (Palace Gong). It possesses a legal sound that calls the *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri* societies to council. The sound of the gong is viewed as the Fon's extension, a disintegrating individual who can be everywhere at

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his territory. The fly whisks and beaded calabashes are also used to store palm wine for drinking, and beads are a symbol of grandeur. The ability of the Fon to "sweep away" chaos is symbolized by the fly whisk, *deng*. A *nchiylav* (attendant) carries both during public shows, representing hierarchy (God) and royalty (Mzeka, 1980).

The Nso Palace is a system of semiotic in which ceremonial artifacts, regalia, and space all work together to justify authority. Symbols function as condensed charters of political theology, inscribing principles of governing, mediating between the human and supernatural, and connecting the living Fon to a lineage of ancestors while *Kovvifem* acts as a mundi axis. His action is a mediator between *Nyuy* (Supreme Being), the *anyuy* (ancestral spirits), and the *wir Nso* (Nso people), the Fon gains authority through its elevation, which spatially enacts hierarchy. The Fon-elect must isolate himself on the mountain during major enthronement ceremonies, where he "eats" royal medicine and receives esoteric teaching from *Taawong* (priests) (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967). The prince changes from human to ritual office as he descends from the mountain and becomes the Fon. According to oral tradition, *Kovvifem* and the palace in *Kumbo* are connected by a leopard's trail. Thus, the leopard emblem on royal regalia alludes to the Fon's magical right of entry to the mountain as well as martial authority. It indicates that a lawful power moves between the sacred mountain and the palace. Sacred fires are set on the mountain during *kikum* rites. Rising smoke is interpreted as communication with the ancestors and *Nyuy*. Additionally, fire distinguishes sacred from profane areas by marking the limits of consecrated space.

The Influence of Ancestral Spirits on Daily Life in Nso Culture

The ancestral spirits symbolize the connection between the divine and the human, and this understanding upholds the holiness of ancestry. Ancestors are revered because of their influence on the biological and spiritual development of the living. Therefore, paying respect to one's ancestors is recognition of the Creator's role in sustaining life and divinity through human ancestry. Nso cosmology is organized around three interrelated realms: *Nyuy* (God), *anyuy* (ancestral spirits), and *kitukensai* (the world of the living). Furthermore, *anyuy* are the most direct and proactive in day-to-day matters. The ancestors are the "living dead," or deceased elders who still have personality, memory, and moral authority (Jumbam, 2001). They are revered as senior members of the lineage whose approval is crucial for maintaining social and cosmic balance rather than being worshipped as gods. Significantly, ancestors shapes the daily life of Nso culture in three dimensions, namely, socio-political order, moral regulation and economic activity

First, the *Fon* (king) is at the top of the hierarchical Nso political system. The Fon's ceremonial ties to royal ancestors kept in the *Nto' Nso* (palace) shrine are the source of his legitimacy (Fanso, 1989). Ancestors must be consulted for important decisions like enthronement, war, and land distribution through libation and divination by *Taawong* experts. Ancestral decrees are upheld by the *Ngwerong* and *Ngiri* regulatory bodies. Ancestral fury, which is thought to show itself as drought, plagues, or death, is invoked when a *ngwerong* decrees are broken. Thus, even in the history of Cameroon's contemporary province, ancestors serve as a transcendent judge, supporting the legitimacy of traditional institutions.

The *Nso* moral code is guarded by ancestors, and ancestral sanctions are meted to enforce taboos pertaining to areas such as incest, thievery, disrespect for elders, and land disputes (Jumbam, 2001). Seldom is misfortune seen as random; when a family has illness, crop failure, or infertility, they contact a diviner, or *ngam*, to find out which ancestor is wronged and what compensation is needed. Restitution frequently takes the shape of reconciliation, confession, or sacrifice. This system establishes a "moral economy" in which the desire for ancestral blessing and the dread of divine retribution preserve communal harmony. Proverbs, folktales, and involvement in sacrifices are used to instill reciprocity between the living and the dead in children at a young age (Nkwi & Warnier, 1982).

Ancestors are ceremoniously linked to the agricultural cycle. In order to request for soil fertility, lineage leaders pour a libation of palm wine on family graves prior to sowing (Chilver & Kaberry, 1967). Held following harvest, the *Mfu* festival is essentially an expression of gratitude to ancestors for their protection. Ancestors can be both health-promoting and disease-causing. While displeased ancestors send *ngan*, a spiritual ailment, satisfied ancestors protect descendants. *Ngaa Shiv*, (traditional healers), assess ancestral curse and recommend the remedies, which could be *fufu*, *palm wine* or *kola nut* rites. Birth, marriage, and death are also ancestral matters: the goal of funeral ceremonies is to change the deceased into a kind of *anyuy* rather than a restless ghost. Infants are brought to lineage ancestors, and weddings need ancestral consent to guarantee fertility. Ancestors are active players in everyday life in Nso civilization rather than only incidental memories. They make laws, make decisions, provide care, and health. Both the living and the dead have a contractual and mutually reliant relationship. While their predecessors offer protection, fertility, and legitimacy, their descendants offer sacrifice, adoration and compliance.

Evaluation

This paper is a presentation of the role of ancestral spirits within a relational ontology in Nso cosmology. It illustrates that the Nso community believes ancestral spirits can engage with the living through various means, such as visions, dreams, and divination. This relationship allows the living to seek protection, knowledge, and guidance from their ancestors. In Nso tradition, ancestral spirits constitute the souls of deceased parents who continue to exist in the afterlife. They are thought to possess authority and spiritual powers that influence the lives of their descendants. Within Nso cosmology, ancestrial spirits serve as a link between the divine and the living; they are involved in the community, imparting wisdom after relaying human concerns to higher spiritual forces. An expression of this reverence is demonstrated during the *Mfu* festival, which is fundamentally a gesture of gratitude to ancestors for their protection. The Nso people regard *Nyuy* as the supreme deity and the creator of the universe. Consequently, showing reverence to *Nyuy* acknowledges the Creator's role in sustaining life and divine connection through human ancestry.

Conclusion

In Nso cosmology, veneration of ancestors is grounded in their enduring contributions to the lives of the living. Successive generations are understood to stand on the shoulders of their forebears, who are believed to have laid the moral, social, and spiritual foundations of the present through protection, wisdom, and guidance during their earthly lives. Honouring them thus functions as an expression of gratitude for their sacrifices and achievements. The Nso hold that upon death, the individual transitions (*kuvsin)* into the realm of ancestors, yet remains active in the affairs of the living. This continued presence constitutes a form of eternal existence. The soul, which originates from *Nyuy* (God), does not depart but becomes one of the “living dead” an active participant in familial and communal life. Ancestors are not deified; rather, they are revered as enlightened beings who have ascended to a higher plane of existence. This ontology affirms the continuity of life, conceptualizing death not as termination but as a passage to another realm. The Nso reaffirm their participation in this eternal cycle and acknowledge the divine essence immanent in all beings.

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A Phenomenological Exploration of Corporate Aesthetics and Strategic Messaging through Embodied Communication

Abstract

Embodied communication has gained traction as a critical factor in shaping corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging. This led this study to adopt a phenomenological approach to exploring how corporations utilize sensory perception, emotional engagement, and embodied cognition to create meaningful connections with stakeholders. The study analyzed the role of visual, tactile, and auditory elements in branding, ranging from colour psychology and material textures to soundscapes and spatial design. It further exposed corporate aesthetics function not merely as visual markers but as deeply ingrained lived experiences that influence consumer perception and brand loyalty. Findings showed that successful corporations integrate embodied communication strategies to construct brand narratives that go beyond verbal messaging. The problem however is that, these strategies stressed the significance of embodied aesthetics in fostering brand identity, emotional resonance, and consumer trust. Thus, the study identified challenges in implementing embodied communication, particularly regarding cultural differences in sensory perception, ethical concerns regarding subconscious influence, and the potential for sensory overload in brand experiences. The implications of this is extended to corporate branding, marketing ethics, and stakeholder engagement, pointing at the need for companies to craft aesthetic strategies that balances sensory appeal with authenticity and clarity. The study concluded by recommending that, businesses continues to innovate through understanding the phenomenological dimensions of corporate communication as essential for fostering meaningful, lasting brand relationships.

Keywords: Embodied Communication, Phenomenological Exploration, Corporate Aesthetics, Strategic Marketing, consumer psychology.

Iniobong Courage Nda, Ph.D.
Department of Mass Communication
University of Uyo, Uyo.
Mobile: +2348026371007
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2083-0389.

Emmanuel Iniobong Archibong, Ph.D.
Department of Philosophy
University of Uyo, Uyo.
Mobile: +2348032325087
E-mail:
emmaiarchibong@uniuyo.edu.ng
ORCID ID: https://orcid.org/0009-0005-3005-2666.

Corresponding Author's Email:
iniobongnda@uniuyo.edu.ng

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Introduction

The imperative for companies to recognize the embodied nature of human communication cannot be overemphasized. At a time when consumer expectations are very experientially and sensually led, there is a strong need for businesses to develop strategies that can create multisensory brands, produce authentic stories, and respect the cultural context of consumers. Disconnected audiences, superficial brand identities, and the inability to connect with meaningful consumer relationships will prevail if this happens. In contrast, organizations that adopt the embodied view of communication by embedding rich sensory environments, emotional connections, and branding strategies that are meaningful to the lived experiences of their stakeholders will likely build more profound loyalty, differentiation, and long-term success.

Thus, in this digitally transformative period, which has ironically increased the centrality of embodied experience, organizations are saddled with the responsibility to negotiate the complicated dialectics between physical presence and virtual representation. This study draws on the work by Merleau-Ponty (1945) on perception as embodied and explores corporate aesthetics not just as a form of visual ornamentation but, in fact, as fundamental carriers of meaning and stakeholder involvement. Küpers (2013) declares that, "The lived body serves as the primary site of knowing and experiencing organisational life" (p. 336), which means that corporate communication strategies need to take up the embodied dimensions of stakeholder experience.

This study draws on a phenomenological approach to explore how the aesthetic choices and communication strategies of some companies reflect and shape embodied experience. By paying close attention to spatial design, visual identity, and multimodal messaging, organizations can create more resonant and authentic connections with stakeholders. Hancock (2005) indicate how embodied communication forms the culture and relationships of stakeholders in organizations. It then follows that, traditional models of sender-receiver in effective corporate messaging need to go beyond a more nuanced understanding of embodied experience. The reason why van Manen (2014, p. 132) identifies, "Phenomenological reflection is not abstract thinking but thinking through the body," a principle just as relevant in corporate contexts.

Conceptual Clarifications

i. Embodied Communication

Communication holds a critical place in human existence that cannot be ignored. No wonder it is a common phrase in the communication field that man cannot not communicate. This means man cannot do without communicating as he communicates intrapersonally (within oneself), interpersonally (between two persons), publicly (between a speaker and an audience) and massly (through a mass medium of communication to a widely dispersed audience). To Verderber, Verdeber & Sellnow (2014, p. 7) "communication is a complex process through which we express, interpret, and coordinate messages with others in order to create shared meaning, meet social goals, manage personal identity, and carry out our relationships."

Also, Seitel, (2004) describes communication as a process of exchanging information, imparting ideas, and making oneself understood by others. Importantly, it also includes understanding others in turn. From the foregoing, communication is all about creating meanings through shared messages. Communicating effectively is crucial between persons and among people. In the work place, communication plays a key role as employers seek oral communication, interpersonal skills, teamwork, presentation skills, speaking and writing skills, analytical skills, and problem-solving skills among others.

These are different forms of messaging that are expressed verbally, visually and nonverbally all in a bid to covey thoughts and feelings which are influenced by the difference contexts in which communication happens according to Verderber, Verdeber & Sellnow (2014). This includes physical context (location, environmental conditions, and proximity), social context (relationship between participants), historical context (background provided by previous communication between the participants), psychological context (the moods and feelings each person brings to the encounter) and the cultural context (the beliefs, values, orientations, underlying assumptions and rituals that belong to a specific culture).

As communication progresses, it goes beyond expression of words to conveying meaning through nonverbal codes, physical interactions and bodily expressions. This has to do with the use of one's body, face and gestures to express the messages, emotions and intentions – embodied or nonverbal communication. Knapp & Hall (2006) refers to it as all messages we send in ways that transcends spoken or written words. Embodied communication is a vital asset to any communication situation that cannot be ignored. Burgoon & Bacue (2003) stresses that it conveys 65 per cent of the meaning communicated in face-to-face interactions. Both verbal and nonverbal cues assist in making meaning of our daily communication. While verbal cues give direct expression of words, nonverbal cues on the other hand, assists in its interpreting emphasizing, substituting, contradicting and assimilating of messages as expressed by the source. Consequently, embodied communication can be said to be inevitable, ambiguous, conveys emotions, multi-channeled, multi-faceted, through its view array of millions of nonverbal behaviours expressed in any given communication situation.

Types of Embodied Communication

Embodied communication is expressed in several ways to include:

i. **Use of body:** Often as kinesics, this is the way and manner the body motions communicate. This includes gesturing (movement of hands, arms and fingers to either accompany, illustrate, reinforce, augment or replace a verbal message), eye contact (the way we look at others when communicating either to show attention or the lack of it, interest or disinterest, respect or other forms of emotions), facial expressions (the expression of emotional state of happiness, sadness, surprise, fear, anger, disgust, and the likes. Research shows that receivers tend to be more consistent in their reading of facial expressions, Ober, (2006, p. 49), posture (the positioning or movement of the body to communicate attentiveness, respect or dominance), touch (also known as haptics, this is the use of the hand, arm or any body part to tickle, hold, embrace, stroke, hug, pinch, slap, kiss, among others, to convey emotions).

ii. **Use of voice:** Also known as paralanguage or vocalics, this goes beyond the actual words expressed in communication, to the pitch, volume, speed, vocalized pauses, quality, and intonation of the words. The entire meaning of a message can be changed through the tone used. For instance, a message spoken quickly can give a different meaning than the one spoken slowly. While communicating, it is common to see people raise or lower their vocal pitch to stress ideas and emotions, loud or soften their vocal tone depending on their emotions, the situation or the topic of discussion, or talk more rapidly when faced with excitement, fright, or slowly to emphasize a point. Other characteristics of the use of voice includes the quality of the voice which distinguishes persons, voice intonation which shows variety, melody or inflection in a speaker and vocalized pauses which are often used to fill-in momentary gaps during communication.

iii. **Use of space:** The use of space is also referred to as proxemics. This defines communication encountered in space and distance. As we communicate with others, we tend to maintain some personal space or distance appropriate to our relationship, culture, or individual preferences. According to Aamodt, (2010, p. 420), "dominant people or those who have authority are given more space by others and at the same time take space from others". We also possess some territorial spaces which we expect others to respect, acoustic spaces where our voices can be comfortably heard, and some artifacts we display in our environments.

iv. **Use of time:** Also known as chronemics, is the way we use interpret the use of time. Time communicates; our cultural inclinations influence our understanding and the use of time, thus straining or encouraging relationships. Time is related not only to culture but to individual status within the organization, hence the need to be cautious when considering how others use time. It is situation- specific. Therefore, while the promptness to time reflects respect, humility and charisma, lateness of an individual on the other hand generates several emotions to include disrespect, slackness, tardiness, full of oneself, and the likes.

v. **Physical appearance:** They are particularly important to make a good first impression. When we encounter people for the first time, one of the first things they notice and can use it to judge us is our looks. First impression matters. Since our choice of clothing, body arts, personal grooming, defines us, it becomes important therefore to pay adequate attention to our appearances. Also, your clothing, jewelry, office and home furnishing, automobile, provide information about your values, taste, heritage, conformity, status, age, sexuality, and group identification, Ober, 2006. A person who is given to wearing bright colors clothing is perceived differently from one given to wearing dull colors.

An intentional communicator should therefore consciously pay attention to his use of embodied communication in order to convey the message emphasized in his words. He should also align his nonverbal communication with the purpose is message intends to convey. Adapting his embodied communication to the situation is also apt as they will be tailored to the success of the communication. Above all, he must ensure his use of nonverbal cues rather that collaborate his communication, does not end up distracting the audiences from the main essence of the communication.

ii.Corporate Aesthetics

One of the ways organizations communicate is through corporate aesthetics. An organization is a group of people working together to achieve a common goal, and communication is a vital part of that process, Ober (2006). According to the author, communication must have occurred before a common goal could even be established. And a group of people working together must interact; that is, they must communicate their needs, thoughts, plans, expertise, and so on.

Every organization must have a strategy – the plans and actions necessary to achieve organizational goals, (Griffin & Moorhead, 2007). It must also have its unique corporate aesthetics which distinguishes it from others. It must have visual identity, sensory and digital experience, including environmental design deliberately orchestrated to create a cohesive and recognizable brand image. Corporate aesthetics are also other forms of embodied communication found in organizations which gives it its unique identity. Griffin & Moorhead, (2007) list them to include:

i. **Size and space:** The size of an organization can be gauged in several ways. It could be measured in terms of total number of employees, value of the organization's assets, total sales in the previous year or number of clients served, or physical capacity. Also, the space between and among employees of all cadres including clients, communicates openness, equality, creativity, flexibility. The architecture, layout, and interior designs of corporate offices and workspaces communicate what the organization stands for and paints a picture in the minds of its clients.

ii. **Organizational technology:** These consist of the mechanical and intellectual processes that transform raw materials into products and services for customers. Organizations have specific technologies that enable them to accomplish their tasks. Their website design, social media presence and digital marketing materials, are experiences that represents the organization and creates an experience among the audiences

iii. **Environment:** The organizational environment includes all of the elements – people, other organizations, economic factors, objects, and events – that lie outside the boundaries of the organization. The general environment includes all of a broad set of dimensions and factors within which the organization operates, including political-legal, social, cultural, technological, economic, and international factors. The task environment includes specific organizations, groups, and individuals who influence the organization. It is necessary to determine the expanse of the environment within which the organization operates to distinguish it from others.

iv. **Rituals:** Rituals are repetitive sequences of activities that express and reinforce the key values of the organization – what goals are most important and which people are important and which are expandable, Robbin & Judge, 2013. These rituals serve as bonds that unite all the internal and external environs of the organization.

v. **Material symbols:** Organizational culture and designs are also communicated through symbolic media. The layout of corporate headquarters, the types of automobiles top executives are given, the sizes of offices, the elegance of furnishings, executive perks, and attires, conveys meaning. These conveys to the employees as

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well as their clients, the employees at the managerial cadre, the organizational taste and desires as well as a niche among competitors.

vi. **Visual symbols:** Logos and branding are designs, typography, and color schemes used to represent an organization. The selection of these colors aids in marketing materials, packaging and digital platforms. The fonts and font sizes also communicate the brand message, while the styles, tone and subject matter of images used to represent the brand communicates the imagery and photography of the organization.

By carefully crafting these corporate aesthetic elements, organizations can create a cohesive environment that reflects their values, personality, and brand promise, ultimately enhancing their reputation and a connect with their target audiences and publics.

Strategic Messaging

Strategizing is a common phrase in organizations as management plan and makes strategies every day. The process of desiring a given outcome is strategizing and this is seen in every facet of an organization. Diggs-Brown (2012, p. 73) maintains that "as fundamental and useful as strategy is to everyday life, it is crucial to organizations. attempting to run an organization, such as a business, without a strategy is folly because organizations must always know where they are headed in order to achieve their goals". Decisions are taken after due and thorough strategizing as regards workforce, workplace, technology, and even messaging. According to Argenti, (2007), an organization, like an individual, has many different reasons for deciding to communicate. Now, determining how to communicate about something is dependent on the communication objective, available resources and diagnosing the image and reputation of the organization.

Messages in organizations have one or more of three basic purposes: to inform (explaining something or telling the audience something), to request or persuade, (motivate and convince the audience) and to build goodwill, (creating a good image of yourself and of your organization), Locker & Kaczmarek, (2007). For an organization to significantly stand out, it must strategically communicate its stand point. From the entrance of an organization up to the chief executive officer's office, an organization who intends to stand above board especially in a competitive business environment must strategically communicate its messages to its requisite publics. According to Griffin & Moorhead, (2007), communication among individuals and groups is vital in all organizations and its purposes include achieving coordinated action, to share information, and to express feelings and emotions.

Strategic messaging refers to the process whereby an organization creates and communicates clearly, concisely, and compellingly, messages capable of aligning with its goals, values and targeted audiences. This involves developing a messaging framework agreed upon by its stakeholders and is capable of influencing its public perception as well as drives its desired outcome. Strategic messaging is important to an organization in several ways. For instance, in corporate communication, any organization is willing to promote its mission, vision, values as well as its product. The ability to craft a generally acceptable message is predicated on the organization's strategic messaging. Also a successful marketing campaign of new products, services or initiative, is hinged on its strategic messaging. Even the public relations unit also requires communicating strategically in the management of crisis and its reputation.

Effective strategic messaging involves:

i. **Defining the core message:** What stands out one organization from the other is its ability to identify the central idea it intends to convey. The message so intended must be clear, complete, correct and builds goodwill. A measurable outcome is determined by a specific message and goal. This is done by developing an understanding of the audiences using symbols, words, music, among other elements that resonates with their needs, values, attitudes, norms and orientations.

ii. **Understanding its target audiences:** Audience-focused messages are vat thee heart of communication, (Diggs-Brown, 2012). An organization's audiences or customers are its most important publics that cannot be ignored if the organization must be sustained. The interest, needs, values and concerns of the intended audiences must be strategically protected in its messaging. The information about your audience can be derived from an audience analysis.

iii. **Determining communication channel:** Developing the message appropriately is determined by the ability to choose an appropriate communication channel. In today's world, organizations are exposed to various communication channels for their internal and external communications. However, the nature of the audiences will determine the choice of channel appropriate for the communication.

iv. **Developing key messaging pillars:** Apart from its core message, an organization should be able to create supporting messages that strengthens its core message as well as resonate with its publics.

v. **Crafting compelling narratives:** Several techniques including the story telling technique can be used to craft relatable, memorable and engaging messages to appeal to its audiences. Argenti, (2007) suggest two most effective message structures – direct and indirect. Direct structure means revealing your main points first, then explaining why; indirect structure explaining why first, then revealing your main point.

vi. **Consistency:** Consistency is a major index that stands out an inspiring organization. Aligning all the communication channels to a unified message sustains organizations in the minds of its audiences.

vii. **Monitoring and measurement:** Organizations must set from the outset what they set out to achieve and how they will measure the success. continuous monitoring, evaluation and restructuring where necessary of the effectiveness of an organization's communication strategy, the content of its messages and delivery channels, to a greater extends will determine its future and development especially in a competitive business environment.

Methodology/Theoretical Framework

Contextually, phenomenology provides a sound methodological framework for the analysis of embodied communication in corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging. As initiated by Edmund Husserl (1970, p. 43), phenomenology is the study of lived experience, directed toward uncovering the structures of consciousness that organize human perception. Furthered by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, this tradition has been extended to stress embodiment as the principal medium in which individuals interact with the world. His "lived body" concept expresses that perception is not a disinterested cognitive act but an immersive, corporeal one (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 105). In corporate communication, phenomenology gives the essential approach for an analysis of how sensory experiences through branding, design, and messaging mediate stakeholders' engagement with corporate identity.

The phenomenological method is particularly suited to the study of corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging because it amplifies first-person experience and intersubjectivity. Unlike positivist approaches, which rely on objective measurement, phenomenology can uncover how individuals experience corporate branding at a pre-reflective, embodied level (Todres & Galvin, 2008, p. 570). This perspective is in tune with the state of the art in research on embodied aesthetics, which shows that aesthetic experience is a fundamentally sensorimotor rather than merely cognitive process, as recently put forward by Ticini, Urgesi, & Calvo-Merino (2015, p. 110). Thus, corporate messaging is not just a textual or symbolic artefact but an experiential phenomenon perceived, internalized, and responded to using the body.

This study uses phenomenological methods to analyze corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging through observational analysis, case studies, and qualitative interviews. Observational analysis involves the examination of corporate branding materials, such as logos, advertisements, website design, and physical corporate spaces, for how sensory cues are deployed to elicit embodied responses. For instance, Küpers *et al*. (2013 p.85) have illustrated how corporate storytelling, when analyzed phenomenologically, reveals the implicit bodily practices that shape organisational identity. Similarly, case studies of specific corporations provide a contextualized understanding of how aesthetic and strategic messaging converge to create an immersive brand experience. These case studies are complemented by the use of semi-structured interviews and focus groups with stakeholders to investigate how individuals consciously and pre-reflectively engage with strategies of corporate communication.

Phenomenological analysis is intrinsically interpretative stressing the process of "bracketing" or *epoché* to set aside preconceptions and enable the lived experience of corporate messaging to appear in all its complexity (Husserl, 1970, p. 52). This follows the principles of the embodied approach, suggested by Todres and Galvin (2011 p526), in that aesthetic and communicative experiences are analysed not as abstract constructs but as deeply situated and sensory phenomena. In line with this interpretative process, the present study tries to reveal the way corporate aesthetics evoke emotional-cognitive-bodily responses that shape stakeholder perceptions and behaviours.

Theoretically, this research is located within the phenomenology of embodiment, borrowing from Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception to explain how corporate communication operates through sensory and affective engagement. It is Merleau-Ponty's concept of "reversibility"-where perception and action are inextricably linked-that provides a framing for how corporate aesthetics and messaging are not passively received but instead actively co-constituted through embodied interaction (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 212). This is in line with recent scholarship on aesthetic organizing, which posits that corporate communication should be considered an ongoing practice that is embodied and engaging at both a conscious and pre-reflective level for the stakeholders (Küpers, 2016, p. 1440). In this vein, corporate messaging is more than a tool of persuasion becoming a powerful, sensorial medium for constructing organizational meaning and identity.

In locating corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging within a phenomenological framework, this study provides an important theoretical and practical contribution toward understanding embodied communication. Theoretically, it extends phenomenological inquiry into the domain of corporate communication, bridging the gap between sensory perception, affective engagement, and organizational identity. Practically, it provides corporations with more profound insights into how to design branding and messaging strategies in ways that foster more meaningful, immersive, and resonant stakeholder experiences. The phenomenological approach in corporate communication could render an important critical perspective for the context where businesses operate within a complex sensory overload and digital fragmentation, where perception, loyalty, and corporate trust become embodied.

Findings and Discussion

As a phenomenological construct, embodied communication provides the critical framework through which corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging transcend the linguistic signifier in ways that touch the consumer sensorially, emotionally, and corporeally. Corporations intentionally build aesthetic environments in the contemporary marketplace that appeal to embodied perception through colour, texture, spatial arrangements, and multimodal storytelling. These strategies not only enhance brand recognition but also cultivate a form of tacit communication wherein consumers internalize corporate narratives through sensory immersion. The embodied dimensions of corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging reveal a deeper interplay between phenomenological experience and brand perception, emphasizing how meaning is not simply transmitted but enacted through corporeal engagement.

Again, the role of embodiment in corporate aesthetics is borne out in how the brands have manipulated the sensory modality to configure consumer experience and emotional resonance. Colour psychology acts as a powerful vehicle for meaning construction in which certain colours will predictably elicit affective states. Basic research indicates that red and orange colours introduce urgency and excitement and are commonly used in fast-food branding to activate salivation; cool tones of blue and green, on the other hand, relate to tranquillity and reliability, and thus are used in financial and healthcare institutions to develop consumer trust in them (Labrecque & Milne, 2013).

Besides colour, the tactility of the product packaging furthers the embodied consumer-brand interaction. Studies suggest that the materiality of packaging, whether matte or glossy, rigid or soft can influence consumer perception of product quality and desirability, effectively shaping purchasing decisions through haptic feedback (Krishna, 2012). By the same token, sound design is an embodied semiotic system wherein auditory branding-a certain snap of a Coca-Cola bottle or the signature chime of a MacBook on startup-builds anticipatory pleasure and reinforces brand familiarity through repeated sensory engagement (Lindstrom, 2005). These elements come together in an immersive brand aesthetic that is not only visually appealing but compelling and forms deep-seated associations beneath conscious awareness.

Strategic messaging, considered through the lens of embodiment, demonstrates how far corporations build narratives that enlist the body as a site of meaning-making. The storytelling in ads often leverages the flesh-and-blood dimensions of consumer experience, turning brand identity into a lived, felt phenomenon. Nike's branding, for instance, consistently integrates bodily exertion, resilience, and transcendence into its messaging, utilizing slow-motion cinematography, dramatic lighting, and rhythmic soundscapes to elicit kinesthetic empathy. Consumers do not merely watch an advertisement but vicariously experience the embodied struggle of an athlete, effectively internalizing Nike's ethos of perseverance and self-actualization (McGonigal, 2013).

Apple, on the other hand, is more minimalist in its approach reflecting not only visual design but also in general tactile and ergonomic philosophy. Smooth aluminium on an iPhone, fluid haptic feedback of its touchscreen, and seamless transitions within the UI all contribute to an embodied experience of technological elegance and intuitive interaction (Norman, 2004). Such strategies illustrate how brands do not only speak through logos and slogans but through the physicality of their products and the multisensory landscapes they build.

These implications of embodied corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging extend beyond immediate consumer engagement to long-term corporate identity fostering consumer loyalty. The phenomenological intertwining of bodily perception and brand meaning suggests that aesthetic and sensory coherence gives rise to a form of implicit trust and familiarity, whereby consumers develop pre-reflective knowledge of a brand's sensory signatures. This process, often referred to as "sensory branding," underlines the embodied character of brand equity, where repeated exposure to specific aesthetic features reinforces consumer loyalty through affective conditioning (Hultén, 2011).

From a critical perspective, however, the ethical dimensions of such an embodied strategy emerge, particularly in their ability to bypass rational deliberation and exploit unconscious affective responses. The use of sensory cues to activate impulse buying or brand addiction does raise some pertinent questions concerning consumer agency and the transparency of corporate influence in the marketplace (Chartrand & Fitzsimons, 2011). Thus, while embodied communication can create a rich brand immersion, it also involves an ethical concern regarding how companies use aesthetic and sensual mechanisms to affect consumer behaviour often not even within the realm of conscious consideration.

In the final analysis, the phenomenological study of embodiment in corporate aesthetic and strategic messaging underlines the deeply affective and corporeal aspect of consumer-to-brand relations. Blending sensory perception, affective resonance, and narrative immersion, companies create environments in which meaning is not just communicated but embodied. Such a development opens up vistas on the concept of communication as some kind of ethereal transmission of information and places branding squarely in the lived and felt dimensions of human existence. It is because companies continue to refine their aesthetics that awareness of embodied mechanisms underlying consumer engagement has become even more vital not just to enhance the effectiveness of brands but to foster ethical consumer-brand relationships.

Recently, the strategic embedding of embodied elements in corporate communication has been a main area of concentration where organizations strive to create immersive and resonant brand experiences. The discussion now proceeds to case studies where corporations have already applied an embodied communication strategy and explore how the aesthetics and messaging would align with stakeholder experiences. It further looks at some of the challenges and limitations inherent in the adoption of such approaches from a critical perspective through phenomenological analysis.

For example, Starbucks has been doing a very good job of building a retail experience that reflects its brand identity. The use of dimmed light, comfortable chairs, and attractive aromas are what customers hang out at their places to achieve this concept called the 'third place' which ultimately helps build communities among the loyalists. It creates a good feel for stakeholder perceptions of a nice cup of coffee while improving brand loyalty. Research has shown that such multisensory environments can increase customer satisfaction and foster positive brand associations (Spence *et al*., 2014, p. 472).

Despite these successes, there are some challenges in implementing embodied communication strategies. Cultural contexts greatly influence the sensory experience and aesthetic sense, thereby making the task of designing experiences that can be pleasing for all very difficult for companies. For example, different colours represent different meanings in different cultures; while white represents purity in the West, it signifies mourning in many Eastern cultures (Aslam, 2006, p. 14). This, therefore, requires a sensitive knowledge of the local environment to avoid misunderstanding and ensure cultural relevance.

Ethical issues also abound in the application of embodied communication. Deliberate manipulations of sensory stimuli to elicit consumer responses make it coercive, arguably bereaving consumers of their autonomy and freedom of choice. For instance, 'scent marketing,' or the practice of using scents to trigger purchasing, has been received by many with suspicion for its potential ability to unconsciously manipulate consumers' choices (Spangenberg *et al*., 1996, p. 67). These ethical navigate dilemmas ought to be carefully navigated by corporations to maintain trust and uphold ethical standards.

From a phenomenological perspective, what can be critiqued in current corporate practices of embodied communication is the tendency toward homogenization. In developing standardized sensory experiences, corporations may also fail to account for individual differences in perception and meaning-making processes, reducing the potential for richness in consumer experiences. This can result in alienating those consumers who do not connect with the preconceived sensory narratives, which in turn threatens the inclusivity and authenticity of the brand experience.

While embodied communication does indeed provide a powerful avenue through which corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging can be significantly enhanced, there are many challenges to its implementation. Corporations need to consider cultural diversities, ethical implications, and individual differences in sensory perception to create authentic and inclusive experiences that resonate with a diverse consumer base. A phenomenological approach, with its emphasis on the subjective and lived nature of human experience, provides a rich source of insight into how to negotiate these complexities and forge meaningful connections with stakeholders.

Evaluation and Conclusion

The phenomenological investigation into the embodied communication of corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging does go a long way in showing precisely how organizations may better and more effectively relate to their respective stakeholders. By putting the human lived experience at the forefront, phenomenology delves into the depths of how sensory perception and embodied contact shape the reception and interpretation processes of messages. This view, therefore, supports the idea that human experience is holistic and embodied within strategic communication initiatives.

The integration of embodiment must be seen in strategic communication, knowing that communication is not merely the transmission of information but is, rather, an embodied relational process which can allow organizations to craft messages that resonate at a deeper, more intuitive level with their audiences. This view corresponds to Butchart's (2019) argument that human communication should be seen as embodied relations and not mechanical processes of transmission. Given such an approach, it becomes very simple for the corporation and its stakeholders to develop real-life and meaningful contacts.

However, this study has certain limitations, such as not being able to provide the exact representation of individual experiences because the phenomenological perspective does not take into consideration some broader sociocultural factors governing corporate aesthetics as well as its communication. The fact of being subjective creates difficulties in terms of generalizability across varying populations. Therefore, future studies may be required to merge mixed-method approaches that combine the depth of phenomenological insight with quantitative data to enhance the understanding of embodied communication in corporate contexts.

Using a phenomenological lens to understand embodied communication in corporate aesthetics and strategic messaging underscores the importance of sensory and embodied experiences in shaping stakeholder perception. Through adopting this methodology, organizations can build communication strategies that are not only more effective but also more sensitive to the subtle ways in which individuals experience and interpret corporate messages. Such a mix of theory and practice together has enormous implications for the betterment of corporate identity and deeper connections with consumers.

Building embodied communication into corporate branding and messaging requires a strategic approach that places authenticity and engagement at the centre. The brand values of the organization should first come out uniformly through all touchpoints to make it coherent and immersive for consumers. An alignment like that creates trust and solidifies the brand identity. For instance, the philosophy of minimalistic design of Apple is reflected in its product's retail environment and marketing material. It gives a unified sensory experience that resonates with the consumers (Corporate Identity, 2023).

Moreover, companies should consider the sensory aspects of their branding efforts. This includes thoughtful use of colour schemes, textures, sounds, and scents that align with the brand's message and appeal to the target audience's sensory perceptions. Research indicates that such multisensory branding can enhance customer satisfaction and promote positive brand associations (Spence *et al.*, 2014, p. 472). Storytelling that reflects the brand's values and mission can also make that bond deeper developing narratives with which consumers can personally relate with brands creating more personal and memorable experiences.

For future research, it would be useful to extend the scope of study to various industries and cultural contexts. This means opening up the study of embodied communication toward different sectors and societies to better understand how cultural nuances may affect corporate aesthetics and messages. Also, combining quantitative methods with phenomenological approaches can increase the generalizability of the study. By using mixed-methods research designs, scholars can combine qualitative insights with depth and quantitative data breadth, culminating in the strongest and more broadly applicable conclusions.

As a recommendation, this study calls on corporate leaders, marketers, and communication strategists to rethink their engagement with audiences through the lens of embodiment. Keeping in mind the new shift toward theoretical understanding as well as practical application, recognizing that all corporate messages, aesthetic choices, and branding strategies are experienced by the human body. Thus, this anchoring of phenomenological principles to corporate strategy will allow businesses to support more profound, immersive, and ethically responsible brand interactions, creating a corporate landscape at once more effective and more in line with the complexities and richnesses of human experience.

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The Role of Remote Work Policies on Entrepreneurial Team Productivity in Tech Companies in Southeast, Nigeria

Abstract

This study examined how remote work policies affect productivity of entrepreneurial teams in various tech companies in Southeast Nigeria, through flexible work hours and remote collaboration. Based on some previous empirical studies, and a descriptive survey of 254 employees from 10 firms, the study analyzed the degree of influence flexible work hours has on the volume of project deliverables, and how remote collaboration affects project working. The study employed the Likert-type questionnaire and analyzed the data using the Pearson correlation. The study found a very strong positive correlation between flexible working hours and project deliverables ($r = 0.96$, $p < .01$); and a strong positive correlation between virtual collaboration and project working ($r = 0.82$, $p < .01$). The studies found that not only adaptive strategies, but flexible work policies and remote collaboration tools, are productivity drivers in Nigeria's developing technology sector. The study suggested that companies should focus on providing flexible work policies, collaboration tools, and culturally adaptive working practices to achieve competitive advantage.

Keywords: Flexible scheduling, Virtual collaboration, Project deliverables, Project efficiency, Tech firms

Dr Martin Ekene Chime
Department of Agric Business and Management
Federal College Of Agriculture Ishiagu, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.
234-8036716476
ORCID ID-0009-0005-9785-3337

Okezie Gloria Ogochukwu
Department of Agric Business and Management
Federal College Of Agriculture Ishiagu, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
234-8067436643
ORCID ID-0009-0000-5726-3037
(Okoyeogochukwugloria@gmail.com)

Dr. Joel Emeka Aro
Department of Agric Business and Management
Federal College Of Agriculture Ishiagu, Ebonyi State, Nigeria***234-8034066504***
ORCID ID-0009-0001-7159-4219
(Joelemeka777@gmail.com)

Corresponding Author's Email: mlkchime@gmail.com

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated global operational changes, including those experienced by Nigeria's technology sector. Forced to lockdown due to the global pandemic, many tech organizations were compelled to implement remote working guidelines to ensure business continuity and minimize the pandemic's impact on work operations (Kniffin et al., 2021). Unlike in countries with reliable digital infrastructures, the Nigerian experience, especially in the Southeast region, encountered peculiar challenges. Due to inadequate power supply and inadequate internet infrastructure, many organizations were pushed into using remote work not just as a preferred option but also a requirement to keep organizations running and therefore forcing many to reconsider the workplace design, teamwork structures, and the perception of productivity itself (Adepoju, 2020). This paragraph introduces how remote work has been used as a crisis management tool, how it has been shaped by the infrastructural limitations, and the post-pandemic hybrid systems emerging in Nigeria's tech ecosystem.

Samuel and Ogunleye (2021) in their study argued that within countries such as Nigeria, remote work enabled greater flexibility in operation and reduced the costs incurred in maintaining an office space, and this ultimately resulted in some unforeseen boosts in productivity. Even with inadequate power supply and very poor internet accessibility, many tech organizations have stated that their employees can produce just as much or even more compared to the pre-pandemic era (Gbadegeshin et al., 2022). The post-COVID-19 era is one where many Nigerian tech firms, especially software and fintech startups, are inclined toward using the hybrid model which balances remote work with office work based on the workers' desire to get out of the house, and consideration for Nigeria's cultural preference for physical proximity which has also been observed in other African countries such as Kenya (Njoroge & Otieno, 2021).

When adequately supported by relevant policies and digital tools, remote working has proven to be beneficial in Nigeria's tech sector and other related industries; isolated negative influences seem to be the minority. Studies have shown improvements in employees' work-life balance and the reduction in commute time resulting in an improvement in efficiency in terms of digital banking and telecommunications in Southeast, Nigeria (Okafor & Eze, 2020). Many employees report lower anxiety levels and greater flexibility to attend to their family obligations, which subsequently led to improved concentration at work. More importantly, organizations with robust policies that take care of all structural constraints have shown improvements in productivity in all categories (Akinwale & George, 2021). Negative consequences identified include social isolation, difficulty in coordination, and the lack of team synchronicity, hence strong management strategies are essential for collaboration and motivation whether employees are working from home or in hybrid settings.

Flexible scheduling practices are fundamental to remote work policies as it allows employees to align their work schedule with times of peak personal productivity; it enhances employee performance and prevents employee fatigue (Bloom et al., 2021). In Nigeria, flexible schedules have made it possible for tech workers to deliver strenuous tasks within short deadlines irrespective of the power supply and intermittent internet connectivity, thereby encouraging innovation which is essential in the tech and entrepreneurship ecosystems. Globally, employees working from home at convenient times have demonstrated increased productivity, improved retention, and enhanced creative problem-solving abilities (Choudhury et al., 2021). In the Southeast Nigerian tech sector, since employees are usually involved in multiple projects, flexible working practices have been of assistance to workers in managing time and resources effectively without undermining productivity especially if adequate management supervision is in place to check the potential impact of job overload.

The effect of remote working strategies on entrepreneurial teams in Nigeria's underdeveloped technology sectors remains an unstudied subject. Studies confirmed that virtual team systems such as Microsoft Teams, Slack, and Zoom are used to foster communication on tasks and feedback processes and other procedures for task-completion (Leonardi & Treem, 2020). These applications help overcome issues such as trust-building among team members that is inherent to remote work and, particularly in African tech, help improve participants' ICT literacy, resource utilization, and outcomes in technology related project exchange in post-pandemic education (Mlambo & Adendorff, 2022). These collaboration tools help circumvent the infrastructural limitation in the case of virtual teams working in the Southeast of Nigeria where the tech sector continues to experience growth especially in software and fintech.

While remote work in developing countries and its challenges in terms of infrastructural deficits, among other factors, have been widely documented, there is minimal attention given to how entrepreneurial teams in the South-eastern part of Nigeria deal with these everyday issues like power outages and poor internet connectivity in the tech hubs (Ugwuja & Nwachukwu, 2021). Hence, the need to manage social isolation and coordination problems in remote or hybrid settings must be addressed by companies and managements. It is against this backdrop that this study examined the role of remote work policies on entrepreneurial team productivity in tech companies in Southeast, Nigeria.

Statement of Problem

In an optimal scenario, remote work policies in Nigeria's tech sector in the South-East would align perfectly with global best practices to ensure productivity, efficient project delivery time and cohesive teamwork amongst entrepreneurial teams. These allow employees to leverage their high creative and focused hours to project requirements and reduce burnout and increase employee retention. These will also enable stable and constant connection through the provision of adequate digital infrastructure (reliable internet connection and power supply) (Bloom et al., 2021).
However, contrary to this ideal, in the tech sector in the South-East of Nigeria,

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remote work has proved to be a double-edged sword to the entrepreneurial teams. With the pandemic and global digitisation accelerating its implementation, productivity gains have failed to be realized because of ineffective policy design, flawed remote work culture and perpetual inaccessible internet (Adeyinka et al., 2025; Adias & Raimi, 2025). This is characterized by a lack of explicit remote work policy within start-ups which has resulted in inconsistent understanding of expectations, unclear work assignment, and poor accountability within the teams. Coupled with an unknown host of variables that cannot be precisely identified and considered; such as the pattern of power outage, the degree of the members' digital literacy, as well as unknown culturally suitable virtual collaborative approaches-all these attributes to failure in achieving synergy and inefficient project delivery, as well as low productivity amongst the tech teams in the South-East of Nigeria. The great extent of the lack of knowledge prevents poorly trained teams from effectively leveraging on the flexibility benefits from the work-from-home policy and from coping with the drawbacks associated with working remotely like lack of communication, isolation etc.

Lack of empirically derived guidelines will cause flexible work policy to be implemented erratically thereby causing job fatigue, increased staff turnover and lack of team cohesiveness. Additionally, it can also cause potential investment withdrawal as most investors prefer firms with demonstrable operational flexibility and productivity standards. If this research is not conducted, it perpetuates the trend of inefficiency in the tech sector of the South-East of Nigeria, thus further widening the gap of the digital and economy divide between the Nigerian South-East and the advanced economies of the world.

Objectives

The main aim of the study is to examine the influence of remote work policies on entrepreneurial team productivity in tech companies in Southeast, Nigeria. Other specific objectives are to;

i. Examine the influence of flexible scheduling on project deliverables in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

ii. Assess the influence of virtual collaboration on project efficiency in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

Research Questions

The following questions guided the study;

i. To what extent does flexible scheduling influence project deliverables in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria?

ii. To what extent does virtual collaboration influence project efficiency in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria?

Hypotheses

The following hypotheses were tested in the course of the study;

i. Flexible scheduling has a significant influence on project deliverables in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

ii. Virtual collaboration has a significant influence on project efficiency in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

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Scope of the Study

The study examined the effect of remote work policies on the productivity of entrepreneurial teams in technology firms in Southeast Nigeria. The goals included the study variables; remote work policies are described as flexible scheduling and virtual collaboration, while entrepreneurial team productivity is described in terms of project deliverables and project efficiency. The area of the study is restricted to technology firms in Southeast Nigeria.

Conceptual Review

Remote Work Policies

Remote work policies are formal organizational guidelines enabling employees to perform duties outside traditional offices, often from home or other locations, covering communication tech, performance evaluation, documentation, cybersecurity, and employee treatment (Barrero *et al.*, 2021). In Southeast Nigeria's tech entrepreneurial firms, these policies emphasize hybrid models to balance operational flexibility, distant collaboration, innovation, and local challenges like unreliable power and internet; well-designed policies reduce costs, access global talent, and improve attraction/retention in a competitive sector (Adebayo & Okechukwu, 2023; Nwankwo et al., 2022; Okafor & Ibe, 2023).

Proxies of Independent Variable

Flexible Scheduling

Remote work policies constitute certain formal organizational structures by which employees can execute their roles beyond the confines of the conventional office typically from their homes, modifying means of communication, evaluating employee performance, documentation, cybersecurity, and the employee's role in the organization (Barrero *et al.,* 2021). In tech entrepreneurial firms in Southeastern Nigeria, these policies focus on hybrid models for the purpose of operational flexibility, remote collaboration, innovation, and the local context, which comprises poor and inconsistent internet and power supply. Cost-effective strategies such as well-elaborated policies, provide organizations the ease of harnessing global talent via improved attraction and retention of employees in competitive markets (Adebayo & Okechukwu, 2023; Nwankwo *et al.*, 2022; Okafor & Ibe, 2023).

Virtual Collaboration

According to Jimenez *et al*. (2017), the term *virtual collaboration* refers to the combination of co-creation, coordination, and value sharing using different types of digital tools (e.g., video conferencing, project management tools, messaging, cloud sharing, and collaborative coding) to facilitate teamwork among remote and geographically dispersed team members. For tech companies in Southeast Nigeria, the combination of virtual collaboration and the specific entrepreneurial context (e.g., relational cultural preferences, iterative speed, and tech entrepreneurial environment) requires a significant increase in trust, communication, and technological fluency. Most of the time, virtual collaboration succeeds using a hybrid of real-time and asynchronous communication, as well as in-person meetings, to maintain team cohesion and promote innovative activities (Chima & Okoye, 2023; Nnaji & Okolie, 2023; Kalu & Ezeh, 2023).

Entrepreneurial Team Productivity

The productivity of an entrepreneurial team is used to mean a small, agile group of people effectively utilizing the limited resources (people, capital, technology, time) to create innovative output of a product, entering a new market, and expanding the business. It focuses more on flexibility, quick adaptation, fast pivots to opportunities, culturally-based collaborative, community-based problem-solving (in contrast with Western models). Although it also introduces both quantitative (features delivered, revenue) and qualitative metrics (learning speed, innovation, market responsiveness) in the infrastructural and regulatory issues (Morris *et al.*, 2022; Ukenna *et al.*, 2023; Ogbonna and Chukwu, 2023).

Proxies of Dependent Variable

Project Efficiency

The efficiency of projects in Southeast Nigerian entrepreneurial tech teams is where the limited resources (time, people, infrastructure, funds) are optimized to produce high-quality results based on uncertainty and constraints. It applies outside the usual measures to the adaptability, sustained innovation, learning among stakeholders, and resource optimization in virtual environments, affectable by the quality of collaboration tools, remote work project management techniques, clarity of communication, and understanding in spite of geographical and infrastructural limitations (Turner *et al.*, 2020; Okafor and Nwankwo, 2023; Ezeh and Nnamdi, 2023).

Project Deliverables

Remote policy project deliverables in Southeast Nigerian tech startups are tangible and intangible deliverables software/apps, integrations, UIs, documentation, prototypes, market research, generated iteratively through MVPs, rapid prototyping, and stakeholder feedback, to agility. Effective coordination, milestones, tracking, review, and communication tools, as well as remote work improve timeliness when accompanied by collaboration tools but can be accompanied by quality assurance issues (PMI, 2021; Nwachukwu and Obi, 2023; Ugwu and Chima, 2022; Eze and Okoli, 2023) are the keys to success in virtual teams.

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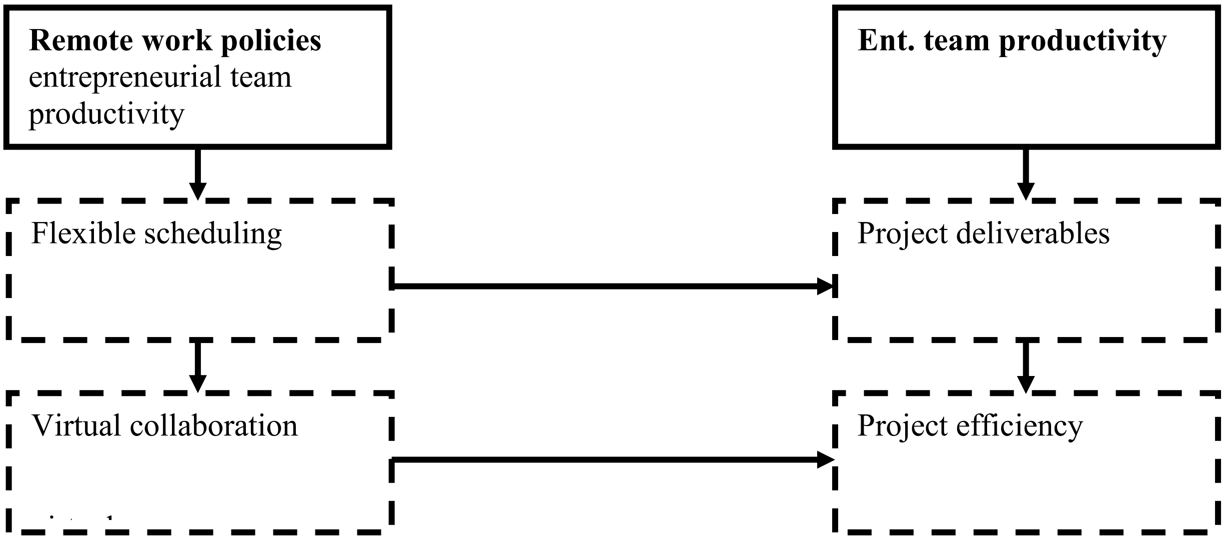
Conceptual Framework



Source: *Self-Developed, 2025*

Fig. 1: Diagram of Conceptual Framework

The above diagram reveals the influence of the independent variable – remote work policies on the dependent variable – entrepreneurial team productivity.

Theoretical Framework

Social Cognitive Theory

Under remote work conditions that pose infrastructure barriers, the Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986, 2001) whose triadic reciprocal cause personal factors, behavior, and environment explains why entrepreneurial teams of Southeast Nigeria tech firms remain productive despite the infrastructural constraints. Self-efficacy facilitates autonomic task performance and self-regulation (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2023), observational learning makes it possible to model powerful remote behaviors to develop collective efficacy (Okafor and Ibe, 2023), and supportive remote policies adjust the environment, and personal qualities such as technological skills and cultural adjustability overcome regional barriers (Chukwu and Adebayo, 2023; Ugwu and Okoli, 2023).

Empirical Review

The Influence of Flexible Scheduling on Project Deliverables in Selected Tech Firms in Southeast Nigeria

The 2022-2023 studies on tech startups in Southeast Nigeria indicate that flexible and asynchronous scheduling can greatly enhance the results of a project provided that it is supported. Flexible work schedules improved on-time delivery by 23% (Adebayo and Okechukwu, 2023), time-to-market by 31% and responsiveness to innovation (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2022), and defects post-deployment by 18% and client satisfaction (Chukwu and Amaechi, 2023). Up to 41% higher deadline compliance in flexible policies over infrastructure resilience through backup power, multiple ISPs, and cloud tools (Eze and Nwosu, 2023) failed to support gains in the case of poor infrastructure. The culturally adaptive strategies combining Igbo communal and relational values with flexibility achieved a 29-percent high completion rate and team satisfaction (Ogbonna and Chima, 2023). The dependability of the study success relied on robust digital collaboration tools, end developed project management, well-planned communication, documentation, and cultural fit instead of flexibility.

The Influence of Virtual Collaboration on Project Efficiency in Selected Tech Firms in Southeast Nigeria

In the tech sector of Southeast Nigeria, virtual collaboration has increased 27 times faster and 34 times shorter with digital tools and infrastructure that require proper training: uniform (e.g., Slack, Teams, Asana) cut task time by 34 and increased efficiency by 27 with ≥50Mbps bandwidth versus 10Mbps (Ikechukwu *et al.*, 2022); 370% with 2 gigabits compared to 100Mbps (Ikechukwu *et al.*, 2 A 45 percent decrease in delays and a 31 percent increase in effectiveness, however, were accompanied by the occasional slowing of tasks by cultural intelligence but was not accompanied by relational focus (Nwosu and Okoro, 2023). Agile techniques (particularly virtual Scrum) were more efficient in completion by 38 percent compared to conventional techniques, and ROI achieved in 810 months even with high initial expenses (Chima & Eze, 2023). Tools with AI integration reduced the time of completing the projects by 47, used resources by 35, and liberated approximately 2.5 creative hours a week a member with an 8-month ROI (Ugwu & Okafor, 2023). The bandwidth resilience, cultural adaptation, agile processes, training, and strategic investment is required in success.

Gaps in Literature Reviewed

Although there is a growing body of literature about remote work policies and their effect (positive and/or negative) on team productivity, a major gap exists in studies that look at the effects of flexible schedules and virtual collaboration on entrepreneurial team productivity in the Southeast Nigerian tech ecosystem. Most studies conducted on this topic have focused on developed countries, with fully developed and regulated tech systems and remote-work cultures. The findings of other studies may not be easily generalized to the developing countries, with limited tech systems, cultures, and entrepreneurial ecosystems (Adebayo *et al.*, 2023). Considering the rapid emergence of Southeast Nigerian tech ecosystem, coupled with the remote work policy adoption trend for entrepreneurial firms, there is a growing need to address this gap to ensure that context-specific studies help in formulating evidence-based policy frameworks and guides for organizational choices in this economically vital technology ecosystem.

Methodology

Research Design

The research design adopted in this study was descriptive survey research design. The research design is best suited for this study because it permits the collection of original data and described the conditions as they existed in their natural setting. It studies the opinions, attitude, behaviours and beliefs of persons on the problems of this study.

Sources of Data Collection

Data were sourced from both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was sourced through the use of five-response, Likert-typed, structured questionnaires. Items were formulated to measure, the influence of remote work policies on entrepreneurial team productivity of tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria. Also, data were sourced from secondary sources like journals, text books, online resources that reviewed the variable of interest; entrepreneurial orientation and performance.

Area of the Study

The study was carried out in among tech firms situated in Southeast, Nigeria. Tech firms are enterprises that deal with digital products and services.

Population of the Study

There are 1451 registered tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria, which perfectly fits the definition of tech firms within the context of this study with over 356 tech firms operating in state capitals in Southeast, Nigeria (SMEDAN, 2024). 10 tech firms were purposively selected because of proximity, size of workforce and market capitalization. Employees of tech firms totaled 254 comprised the population of interest in this study.

Distribution of Employers and Employees of selected Tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

S/N	Tech Firms		Number of Employees
1	SiliconAfrica Technologies	Owerri, Imo	15
2	Xend Finance	Enugu, Enugu	27
3	RAD5 Tech Hub	Aba, Abia	35
4	DevAmplify Hub	Awka, Anambra	28
5	DigiHub Nnewi	Nnewi, Anambra	27
6	Testrogen Hub	Abakaliki, Ebonyi	26
7	Genesys Tech Hub	Enugu, Enugu	24
8	Lawpat Technologies	Akwa, Anambra	35
9	Rooth Hub	Owerri, Imo	14
10	InnovateTech Solutions	Abakaliki, Ebonyi	23
	Total		**254**

Sampling Technique

The study adopted purposive sampling technique in selecting the tech firms incorporated in the study. This was adopted because all the tech firms deal in retail services, have an employee workforce, between 10 – 50 employees etc. While convenient sampling technique was adopted in sampling all the respondents incorporated in the study.

Reliability of Test Instrument

A pilot study was adopted in order to check for the validity and reliability of the questionnaire formulated. Greenfield (2015) defined it as a small-scale, preliminary investigation conducted before the main research project. It serves as a trial run to test and refine the research design, methodology, data collection instruments, and procedures. 10 tech firms founders were conveniently drawn from the Delta state, for the pilot test of the questionnaire and a Cronbach Alpha of α = .83 was gotten, thus affirming the internal consistency of the questions contained in the questionnaire.

Validity of Test Instrument

The face and content validity of the instrument was used by giving out the copies of the questionnaires to the supervisor and some professionals in the field of Research in Management Science to confirm the authenticity of the items contained in the questionnaire, in the measurement of the intended variables.

Method of Data Analyses

Data from the questionnaire were analyzed with the aid of SPSS version 23. Data from the questionnaire were analyzed using mean and standard deviation. For the 5-point Likert scale questions, the strongly agreed (SA), agreed (A) Neutral (N) Disagree (D) and strongly disagree (SD). Pearson r Moment Correlation was adopted in the test of hypotheses.

Decision Rule

Accept the alternative hypothesis, if the calculated Pearson r value is less than p<.05significance level

Data Presentation

Descriptive Analysis

Table 4.5: Distribution of Responses on the influence of flexible scheduling on project deliverables in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Flexible scheduling has enabled me to meet project deadlines more effectively.	254	1	5	2.93	1.091
2. Having control over my work hours has improved the quality of project deliverables.	254	1	5	2.97	1.146
3. Flexible scheduling reduces stress and enhances my ability to complete assigned tasks on time.	254	1	5	3.23	1.103
4. Project deliverables are often delayed when flexible scheduling is not practiced in my firm.	254	1	5	3.11	1.205
5. Flexible scheduling promotes better alignment between personal productivity and project outcomes.	254	1	5	3.23	1.103
Valid N (listwise)	**254**				

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The above table indicates how respondents rated flexible scheduling, in relation to project deliverables. More than half of respondents, with mean score (M= 2.93, SD= 1.09), agreed that flexible scheduling has aided them in meeting deadlines.

Respondents who mean score (M= 2.97, SD= 1.15) stated that having control of their working hours, improved the quality of their project deliverables. Respondents who mean score (M= 3.23, SD= 1.10) stated that flexible scheduling decreased stress and improved task completion. Most respondents agreed that project deliverables can be postponed when flexible scheduling is not implemented (M= 3.11, SD= 1.21). Most respondents stated flexible scheduling improves the alignment of personal productivity and the outcome of the projects.

Table 4.6: Distribution of Responses on the influence of virtual collaboration on project efficiency in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. Virtual collaboration tools (e.g., Zoom, Slack, Teams) have increased the speed of project execution.	254	1	5	2.92	1.058
2. Working virtually with team members improves the accuracy and efficiency of project tasks.	254	1	5	2.97	1.146
3. Virtual collaboration reduces communication gaps and enhances coordination in project activities.	254	1	5	3.23	1.103
4. Project efficiency is negatively affected when virtual collaboration tools are poorly utilized.	254	1	5	3.11	1.205
5. Virtual collaboration has improved my team's ability to work across different locations without reducing efficiency	254	1	5	2.97	1.146
Valid N (listwise)	**254**				

Source: Field Survey, 2025

The table above illustrates how respondents rated the efficacy of virtual collaboration in assisting project efficiency; most respondents stated that using virtual collaboration tools improved the speed of project execution (M= 2.92, SD= 1.05). Most respondents stated that working virtually with team members improved the accuracy and efficiency of project tasks (M= 2.97, SD= 1.14). Most respondents stated that virtual collaboration improved communication and coordination among project activities (M= 3.23, SD= 1.10). Most respondents stated that project efficiency was reduced when virtual collaboration tools were used (M= 3.11, SD= 1.21). Lastly, more than half of the respondents stated that virtual collaboration improves the team's ability to work in different locations without compromising efficiency.

Data Analysis

Hypothesis 1

Flexible scheduling has a significant influence on project deliverables in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

Correlations

		flexible scheduling	project deliverables
Pearson Correlation	flexible scheduling	1.000	.964
	project deliverables	.964	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	flexible scheduling	.	.000
	project deliverables	.000	.
N	flexible scheduling	254	254
	project deliverables	254	254

The Pearson r value is 0.96, which show a strong significant relationship between flexible scheduling and project deliverables, since the significance level is less than 0.01. Hence, we accept the hypothesis which states that flexible scheduling has a significant influence on project deliverables in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria (r= 0.96, p< .01).

Hypothesis 2

Virtual collaboration has a significant influence on project efficiency in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria

Correlations

		virtual collaboration	project efficiency
Pearson Correlation	virtual collaboration	1.000	.823
	project efficiency	.823	1.000
Sig. (1-tailed)	virtual collaboration	.	.000
	project efficiency	.000	.
N	virtual collaboration	254	254
	project efficiency	254	254

The Pearson r value is 0.82, which show a strong significant relationship between virtual collaboration and project efficiency, since the significance level is less than 0.01. Hence, we accept the hypothesis which states that virtual collaboration has a significant influence on project efficiency in selected tech firms in Southeast, Nigeria (r= 0.82, p< .01)

Discussion of findings

Objective I: Influence of flexible scheduling on project deliverables

Quantitative analysis shows a very strong positive correlation (r = 0.96, p < .01) between flexible scheduling and improved project deliverables in Southeast Nigeria's tech firms, surpassing prior findings such as 23% more on-time deliveries (Adebayo & Okechukwu, 2023) and 31% faster time-to-market (Nwankwo *et al.*, 2022). This exceptionally high relationship, alongside support from reduced defects in asynchronous setups (Chukwu & Amaechi, 2023) and infrastructure-adjusted gains (Eze & Nwosu, 2023), indicates flexible scheduling functions as an operational necessity—enabling workers to navigate power outages, connectivity issues, and cultural factors—rather than mere convenience, thereby sustaining high-quality, timely deliverables in challenging entrepreneurial environments.

Objective II: Influence of virtual collaboration on project efficiency

A strong positive correlation (r = 0.82, p < .01) confirms that virtual collaboration significantly enhances project efficiency in Southeast Nigeria's tech sector, aligning with evidence of 34% faster completion via collaboration tools (Okoli & Nnamdi, 2023), 42% higher efficiency with adequate bandwidth (Ikechukwu *et al.*, 2022), and 38% gains from agile-virtual integration (Chima & Eze, 2023). Although powerful, its impact is slightly weaker than flexible scheduling's, likely due to persistent bandwidth and connectivity constraints, underscoring the need for cultural adaptations in communication (Nwosu & Okoro, 2023) and robust infrastructure to maximize efficiency in the region's entrepreneurial tech ecosystem.

Conclusion

The study demonstrated with statistical significance that remote work policies improve productivity of entrepreneurial teams in Southeast Nigerian tech firms, and with flexible working hours having the strongest correlation to output and virtual collaboration having the strongest positive impact to output, and less negative impact to collaboration. It shows that the components of remote work, which in the past were considered temporary solutions implemented during the pandemic, are now refined to become core components of strategy to address the infrastructural gaps of the region. Such components are essential to the achievement of the optimum productivity levels of a region. Therefore, technology policymakers and tech leaders in the region to expand their focus on remote work and virtual collaboration tools as the primary elements of entrepreneurial productivity in developing technology hubs.

Recommendations

The study proffered the following solutions to tech companies;

1. **Implementation of flexible scheduling policy:** Technology companies need to respond to local infrastructure challenges and develop flexible scheduling. In terms of performance measurement, systems should be developed that prioritize the delivery of quality outputs rather than valuing outputs based on time.

2. **Investing on virtual collaboration platforms:** Companies need to build strong systems for virtual collaboration and train employees on digital tools. Additionally, culturally relevant virtual communication protocols should be developed that combine local and global preferred communication methods.

Contribution to Knowledge

This study brought to the forefront the importance of remote work policies for markets with constrained infrastructure. The findings contributed to theory by affirming the applicability of Social Cognitive Theory to remote work and offering an actionable model for culturally tailored policy adaptations in the sub-Saharan African context.

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Funding Gaps and Career Progression of Lecturer-Financed Qualification Acquisition in Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture

Jamiyu Abiodun Ibraheem
Department: Entrepreneurship Division, Federal College of Agriculture, Ishiagu, Ebonyi State, Nigeria
+2348032459428
ORCID: 0009-0005-8621-5305

Ogochukwu Gloria Okezie
Department: Agribusiness Management, Federal College of Agriculture, Ishiagu, Ebonyi State, Nigeria.
+2348067436643
ORCID: 0009-0000-5726-3037

Leonard Uchechukwu Agu
Department: Agricultural Extension and Management, Federal College of Agriculture, Ishiagu, Ebonyi State.
E-mail: aguleonard80@gmail.com
ORCID: 0009-0001-6602-2662.

Johnson Ngbede Ameh
Department: Cooperative Economics & Management, Federal College of Agriculture, Ishiagu, Ebonyi State, Nigeria +2347035911148. ORCID: 0009-0008-9208-1341

Corresponding Author's Email:
jamiyuibraheem2022@gmail.com

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Abstract

Federal Colleges of Agriculture in Nigeria play a crucial role in agricultural education and rural development. However, lecturers in these institutions face persistent challenges in acquiring the qualifications required for career advancement. Unlike lecturers in universities and polytechnics who benefit from Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund)–supported staff development programs, academic staff in Federal Colleges of Agriculture are largely excluded from formal governmental funding mechanisms. Consequently, many lecturers are compelled to personally finance their postgraduate education, often under conditions of financial strain and professional uncertainty. Deploying Human Capital Theory and Institutional Theory, this study explored the lived experiences of lecturers who self-finance their qualification acquisition, with particular attention to perceived funding gaps, institutional neglect, and implications for career progression. A qualitative phenomenological research design was adopted to capture the meanings lecturers attach to self-sponsored professional development within the Nigerian agricultural tertiary education system. Data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with purposively selected lecturers from Federal Colleges of Agriculture who had personally financed, or were currently financing, postgraduate qualifications required for career advancement. Interview data were transcribed and analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis, which involved identifying significant statements, coding recurring meanings, and clustering them into shared experiential themes. The data were analyzed using thematic phenomenological analysis, involving iterative coding and the identification of shared experiential themes. Findings revealed that lecturer-financed qualification acquisition is experienced as both a survival strategy and a personal investment in career continuity amid systemic exclusion. Participants reported significant financial sacrifices, delayed promotions, emotional stress, and reduced institutional commitment, alongside intentions to migrate to better-funded institutions. The study concluded that exclusion from government-supported staff development schemes undermines lecturer morale, retention, and institutional sustainability. It recommended the formal inclusion of Federal Colleges of Agriculture in TETFund academic staff development interventions to promote equity and strengthen agricultural education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Lived Experiences, Career Progression, Lecturer Self-Financing, Phenomenological Study, Federal Colleges of Agriculture

Introduction

The pursuit of higher qualifications among academic staff in tertiary institutions represents a critical intersection between individual career aspirations and institutional development objectives. In Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture, lecturers find themselves navigating a complex landscape where professional advancement depends on acquiring advanced degrees, with the financial mechanisms to support such endeavors remaining inadequate or entirely absent.

These institutions play a crucial role in agricultural education and rural development, with their lecturers facing significant challenges in acquiring the necessary qualifications for career progression. Unlike universities and polytechnics, which benefit from the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) for staff training, Federal Colleges of Agriculture are often excluded from similar government funding schemes. This situation creates a paradoxical condition where institutions demand higher qualifications for promotion and competitive positioning, while simultaneously failing to provide the necessary financial infrastructure to facilitate such academic development. The resulting scenario places an extraordinary burden on individual lecturers who must choose between career stagnation and personal financial sacrifice, with many independently financing their professional development in the absence of institutional support. This phenomenon raises fundamental questions about the sustainability of academic workforce development, the equity of career progression systems, and the long-term implications for educational quality and the colleges' overall functionality in specialized agricultural institutions. The strain between institutional expectations and organizational support mechanisms reflects broader challenges within Nigeria's tertiary education sector, where resource constraints and systemic exclusion from national funding frameworks intersect with aspirations for academic excellence and international competitiveness.

Funding gaps in educational institutions have been identified as critical impediments to faculty development and institutional growth across developing economies. These financial deficiencies manifest in various forms, including inadequate budget allocations for staff training, absence of dedicated scholarship schemes, and limited infrastructure for research and postgraduate studies. Recent research has demonstrated that chronic underfunding in Nigerian tertiary institutions severely constrains staff development programs, with many institutions allocating less than 5% of their budgets to capacity building activities (Adeyemo & Ogunleye, 2023). The consequences extend beyond individual career trajectories to affect institutional reputation, program accreditation status, and the overall quality of educational delivery. Studies further reveal that financial constraints in higher education lead to reduced research output, limited conference participation, and increased brain drain as qualified academics seek better-resourced environments (Olutayo *et al.*, 2024). The exclusion of Federal Colleges of Agriculture from TETFund capacity-building programs represents a particularly egregious form of institutional discrimination, creating a two-tiered system within Nigeria's tertiary education landscape where universities and polytechnics receive systematic support while agricultural colleges remain marginalized. This funding discrimination not only perpetuates inequality but also jeopardizes the future of agricultural education in a nation where food

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security and rural development remain paramount national concerns.

Career progression in academic settings serves as both a motivational framework and a quality assurance mechanism, ensuring that institutions maintain standards while providing pathways for professional growth. The traditional academic career ladder, which typically progresses from assistant lecturer to the highest ranks, depends fundamentally on the acquisition of higher degrees and demonstrated research productivity. Recent evidence indicates that career progression challenges in Nigerian higher education institutions significantly impact job satisfaction and retention, with delayed promotions and unclear advancement criteria contributing to widespread frustration among academic staff (Akinola & Nosike, 2024). However, when progression systems exist without corresponding support structures, they transform from motivational frameworks into sources of frustration and inequity. This challenge is particularly acute in Federal Colleges of Agriculture, where lecturers face the same rigorous qualification requirements as their university counterparts but lack access to the institutional funding mechanisms that facilitate such advancement. The implications are particularly severe in specialized institutions such as agricultural colleges, where the need for advanced technical expertise must be balanced against the practical challenges of acquiring relevant qualifications, often in contexts where program availability and accessibility remain limited. The resulting retention crisis sees qualified lecturers frequently migrating to either universities or polytechnics with TETFund support or departing from academia entirely, thereby depleting these colleges of experienced faculty and undermining their capacity to deliver quality agricultural education.

Situated in Human Capital Theory, this study investigates why these academics continue to invest their personal funds in higher education despite limited employer backing and uncertain returns, examining the broader implications of this self-investment pattern for both individual careers and institutional sustainability. Understanding this dynamic is essential for developing sustainable solutions that balance institutional needs with individual capacity, ensuring that career advancement in specialized agricultural education remains accessible based on merit and potential rather than personal financial circumstances.

Statement of the Problem

Federal Colleges of Agriculture in Nigeria are mandated to build a competent agricultural workforce capable of supporting national food security and agribusiness development. However, achieving this mandate depends critically on the continuous training, qualification upgrading, and career progression of their lecturers. Despite the importance of staff development, many lecturers in these colleges report chronic underfunding of training programs, limited sponsorship opportunities, and delayed access to institutional support. As a result, a significant number of lecturers resort to self-financing their postgraduate studies and professional qualifications.

This growing trend of lecturer-financed qualification acquisition presents several challenges. The financial burden of paying tuition fees, research costs, transportation, and other academic expenses often places lecturers under economic strain, forcing them to take personal loans, reduce their living standards, or divert resources meant for family welfare. These pressures may also affect job performance due to fatigue, divided attention, or reduced engagement in scholarly activities. Compounding this problem is the reality that delayed or insufficient institutional sponsorship directly affects career progression. Many lecturers experience stagnation because higher qualifications are mandatory for promotion, with funding gaps hindering timely completion of postgraduate programs. Consequently, institutions face a shortage of highly qualified staff, reduced research output, and challenges in meeting accreditation requirements.

Despite these concerns, there is limited empirical evidence on how funding gaps shape lecturers' decisions to self-finance, the nature of the burdens they encounter, and the long-term implications for their career development within Federal Colleges of Agriculture. This lack of sector-specific research leaves policymakers without reliable data for designing effective staff development policies. Therefore, the problem this research seeks to address is the insufficient understanding of the funding gaps and their impact on career progression, which has resulted in a growing reliance on lecturer-financed qualification acquisition in Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture.

Research Objectives

These are to:

i. Examine the extent and nature of financial burden experienced by lecturers in Federal Colleges of Agriculture who self-finance their postgraduate programs, including their coping strategies and investment patterns.

ii. Analyze the impact of TETFund exclusion and self-funded professional development on lecturer retention, career progression trajectories, and institutional capacity within Federal Colleges of Agriculture.

iii. Investigate the policy frameworks and structural mechanisms that perpetuate the systematic exclusion of Federal Colleges of Agriculture from governmental staff development funding, and to identify necessary reforms for equitable access.

Research Questions

i. What is the financial burden borne by lecturers in Federal Colleges of Agriculture who self-finance their postgraduate studies, and what coping mechanisms do they employ to manage this burden while maintaining their professional and personal well-being?

ii. How does the systematic exclusion from TETFund interventions and reliance on self-financing affect lecturer retention rates, career advancement timelines, and the overall institutional capacity of Federal Colleges of Agriculture compared to universities and polytechnics?

iii. What are the policy rationales and institutional frameworks underlying the exclusion of Federal Colleges of Agriculture from TETFund academic staff development funding, and what specific reforms are necessary to achieve equitable access to capacity-building resources across all federal tertiary institutions in Nigeria?

Literature Review

The Nigerian tertiary education system is characterized by a significant disparity in funding and resource allocation, creating a stratified environment where certain institutions are systematically advantaged over others. This review explores the existing literature on the critical issue of lecturer-financed qualification acquisition within Federal Colleges of Agriculture (FCAs) in Nigeria. It is structured into four main parts: a conceptual review of the key themes, an expansion of the Human Capital and institutional theoretical frameworks, an empirical review of recent studies, and discussion of the research gaps identified. The central argument threading through this review is that the exclusion of FCAs from national funding mechanisms like the Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) is not merely a financial oversight but a systemic policy failure that undermines human capital development, depletes institutional capacity, and jeopardizes the nation's agricultural sustainability.

Conceptual Review

Funding Gaps and Institutional Exclusion in Nigerian Tertiary Education

The concept of "funding gaps" in this context transcends a simple lack of funds referring to a structured and systemic exclusion of specific institution types from national budgetary mechanisms. The Tertiary Education Trust Fund (TETFund) was established to intervene in the "decay and atrophy" in Nigerian tertiary institutions (TETFund Act, 2011). However, its mandate explicitly covers only Universities, Polytechnics, and Colleges of Education. This legislative framework intentionally excludes Federal Colleges of Agriculture, creating what researchers term a "funding apartheid" (Oluwatobi & Oloruntoba, 2022). This exclusion is a primary driver of the financial precarity faced by FCAs. Recent analyses of federal budgetary allocations confirm that FCAs receive significantly lower capital and overhead costs compared to their university counterparts, despite having similar operational mandates in training and research (Nwosu & Eze, 2023). This disparity is not an accident but a deliberate policy outcome that reinforces institutional hierarchy.

Lecturer-Financed Qualification Acquisition

The phenomenon of "lecturer-financed qualification acquisition" is a direct consequence of the aforementioned funding gap. In the absence of institutional support, the financial burden for professional development shifts entirely onto the individual academic. This practice represents a significant private investment in human capital, where lecturers use personal savings, loans, or family support to fund postgraduate diplomas, Master's degrees, and Doctorates. A recent study by Adeyemi and Lawal (2024) found that over 85% of early-career lecturers in FCAs considered personal loans as their primary strategy for funding further education. This self-financing model has profound implications. It transforms professional development from a shared institutional responsibility into a personal financial risk, creating a barrier that is both economic and psychological (Ibrahim, 2023). The concept underscores a breakdown in the traditional employer-employee developmental contract within the public sector.

The phenomenon of lecturer-financed qualification acquisition represents a growing trend in developing countries where institutional budgets cannot accommodate comprehensive staff development programs, but it has become particularly pronounced and systemic in Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture due to their exclusion from national funding schemes. This self-funding approach requires academic staff to bear the full financial burden of tuition fees, research costs, and associated expenses while often maintaining full teaching responsibilities. Contemporary research reveals that self-sponsored professional development among Nigerian academics creates substantial financial hardship, with many lecturers depleting personal savings, securing loans, or engaging in additional income-generating activities to finance their studies (Ogundele *et al.,* 2023).

Evidence suggests that over 80% of lecturers in Federal Colleges of Agriculture personally fund their postgraduate studies, with many incurring expenses equivalent to two to four years' worth of their salaries to obtain the qualifications necessary for career advancement. The implications extend beyond individual hardship to encompassing broader concerns about equity, as this system inherently favors those with greater personal financial resources or family support systems, thereby creating barriers that disproportionately affect junior staff who possess the least accumulated wealth yet face the greatest pressure to acquire higher qualifications. Furthermore, the dual demands of full-time teaching and self-financed study often result in reduced effectiveness in both domains, with studies showing that self-funded academics experience higher stress levels, extended completion times, and compromised work-life balance (Makinde & Shorunke, 2024). This financial burden not only affects individual lecturers but also undermines the institutional capacity of Federal Colleges of Agriculture to maintain qualified staff and deliver quality education.

The convergence of these factors which are persistent funding gaps, systematic exclusion from TETFund programs, increasingly stringent career progression requirements, and the prevalence of self-financed qualification acquisition creates a complex and often unsustainable situation for lecturers in Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture. The institutional demand for qualified staff exists in direct tension with the absence of adequate support mechanisms, effectively shifting the financial burden of workforce development from organizations to individuals in a manner that is both inequitable and unsustainable. This systemic challenge threatens both individual career trajectories and institutional capacity building, as the most talented academics may seek opportunities elsewhere or abandon qualification pursuits altogether due to financial constraints. The situation reflects a fundamental misalignment between policy aspirations and resource allocation, where career progression frameworks function more as aspirational ideals than achievable pathways for the majority of academic staff in these marginalized institutions.

Career Progression and Institutional Capacity

Career progression in the Nigerian academic context is rigidly tied to the acquisition of higher qualifications, such as postgraduate diplomas, degree, a Master's degree, a PhD for promotion (National Board for Technical Education, 2018). When lecturers cannot access funding to obtain these mandatory qualifications, their career progression stalls. This creates a dual crisis: at the individual level leading to professional stagnation, demotivation, and burnout. At the institutional level, it erodes capacity. A college with a high proportion of underqualified staff cannot secure accreditation for its programs, attract research grants, or fulfill its mandate of producing high-quality graduates (Chike-Okoli & Onyema, 2022). Therefore, the career progression of lecturers is inextricably linked to the institutional capacity of the FCAs. The inability of staff to progress directly translates into the inability of the institution to function effectively, creating a vicious cycle of decline that threatens the entire agricultural education value chain.

Empirical Review

Recent empirical studies have begun to quantify and qualify the challenges faced by FCAs and their staff. On the issue of funding disparity, a comprehensive policy analysis by Nwosu and Eze (2023) tracked federal allocations to tertiary institutions over a decade (2013-2023). Their findings conclusively showed that FCAs received, on average, 60% less capital funding per student than federal universities. They directly link this disparity to the deteriorating physical infrastructure and lack of modern teaching aids in the colleges.

Regarding the impact on lecturers, the mixed-methods study by Adeyemi and Lawal (2024) surveyed 150 lecturers across five FCAs. They reported that the average cost of obtaining a PhD for a lecturer was equivalent to 3.2 years of their gross salary. This financial strain was cited as the primary reason for mental stress and low job satisfaction. Their qualitative data revealed narratives of lecturers taking on significant side jobs, including private farming and commercial transportation, to fund their studies, diverting time and energy from their primary teaching duties.

The consequences for institutional capacity and retention are starkly illustrated in the work of Chike-Okoli and Onyema (2022), who conducted a case study of two FCAs. They found a 35% attrition rate among lecturers with PhDs over a five-year period (2017-2022), with most moving to TETFund-supported universities. This has resulted in a situation where some departments are now headed by senior lecturers without PhDs, which jeopardizes the National Universities Commission (NUC) and National Board for Technical Education (NBTE) accreditation of their programs.

Okonkwo (2023) applied a political economy lens to argue that the exclusion of FCAs is a form of institutional marginalization rooted in Nigeria's historically fragmented educational governance, where ministries of education and agriculture have overlapping jurisdictions, leaving FCAs in a bureaucratic no-man's land. This study provides the crucial "why" behind the funding gap, moving beyond description to explanation.

Research Gap

The extant literature successfully establishes the existence of a severe funding gap, its negative impact on lecturers' welfare and career progression, and its deleterious effect on institutional capacity. The empirical evidence is compelling and points to a systemic crisis. While many studies document that lecturers self-finance and that this causes problems, there is a need for a more granular, qualitative exploration of the strategies, sacrifices, and long-term career decision-making of these lecturers. How do they navigate this financial burden? What is the tipping point that makes them decide to stay or leave? This research will fill this gap by providing a deep, phenomenological exploration of the lived experiences of lecturers in FCAs, thereby humanizing the statistics and providing a robust evidence base for the urgent policy recommendations it seeks to propose.

Theoretical Framework

This study will be anchored on a theoretical framework that combines Human Capital Theory (HCT) and Institutional Theory. HCT provides the lens to understand the individual investment decisions and rational calculations made by lecturers as they finance their own qualifications. Institutional Theory, in turn, provides the macro-level context, explaining the coercive policy structures and normative pressures that create the funding gap and make this personal investment both necessary and precarious.

Human Capital Theory

Human Capital Theory, originally developed by Schultz (1961) and extensively elaborated by Becker (1964), posits that individuals and organizations invest in education and training because these investments enhance productivity and future earnings. According to Becker (1964), "activities that influence future monetary and psychic income by increasing the resources in people" constitute investments in human capital (p. 1). This theory is particularly relevant to understanding why lecturers in Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture choose to self-finance their postgraduate qualifications despite institutional funding gaps.

Schultz (1961) emphasized that education should be viewed not merely as consumption but as a productive investment that yields returns over time. He argued that "much of what we call consumption constitutes investment in human capital" (p. 1). In the context of this research, lecturers' decisions to pursue higher qualifications using personal funds represent calculated investments aimed at enhancing their career prospects, securing promotions, and increasing long-term earnings potential within the academic hierarchy.

The theory's core assumption, that rational individuals weigh the costs of education against expected future benefits provides a framework for analyzing lecturers' motivations and decision-making processes (Becker, 1993). When institutional funding is inadequate or unavailable, lecturers must evaluate whether the personal financial burden of acquiring qualifications is justified by anticipated career advancement, salary increases, and professional recognition. This cost-benefit analysis becomes more complex in resource-constrained environments like Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture, where funding gaps may create significant financial barriers to career progression.

Furthermore, Sweetland (1996) noted that human capital theory has evolved to recognize that investments in education yield both private returns to individuals and social returns to organizations and society. This dual perspective is critical for understanding the implications of self-financed qualification acquisition. While lecturers bear the immediate costs, both they and their institutions potentially benefit from enhanced teaching quality, research productivity, and institutional reputation.

Institutional Theory

Institutional Theory, as articulated by DiMaggio and Powell (1983), focuses on how organizational structures and practices are shaped by institutional pressures, norms, and expectations within their broader environment. This theory explains how organizations conform to regulatory requirements, normative standards, and cultural-cognitive frameworks to gain legitimacy and survive in their institutional fields. DiMaggio and Powell (1983) identified three mechanisms of institutional isomorphism which are coercive (stemming from political influence and legitimacy problems), mimetic (resulting from uncertainty), and normative (associated with professionalization).

In the context of Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture, institutional pressures significantly influence both organizational funding policies and individual career progression requirements. Scott (2008) expanded institutional theory by emphasizing three pillars of institutions which are regulative (rules and laws), normative (values and norms), and cultural-cognitive (shared understandings and meanings). These pillars help explain how qualification requirements for academic promotion become institutionalized expectations that lecturers must meet, regardless of whether institutional funding support is available.

The regulatory pillar is particularly relevant to this research, as government policies and institutional regulations mandate specific qualification thresholds for academic advancement. According to Scott (2008), regulative institutions "constrain and regularize behavior" through rules, laws, and sanctions (p. 52). Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture operate within a regulatory framework that requires lecturers to obtain higher degrees for promotion, yet these same regulations may not be accompanied by adequate funding mechanisms, creating an institutional gap that individuals must bridge through self-financing.

Meyer and Rowan (1977) argued that organizations adopt institutionalized structures and practices to enhance their legitimacy, even when these practices do not improve technical efficiency. This perspective illuminates why colleges maintain strict qualification requirements for promotion despite inadequate funding. Adherence to these standards signals conformity to broader academic norms and maintains institutional legitimacy within the educational sector. However, this creates a burden-shifting dynamic where individual lecturers absorb the costs of meeting institutionally mandated requirements.

The integration of Institutional Theory with Human Capital Theory reveals the dual pressures facing lecturers: institutional expectations that demand higher qualifications for career progression, coupled with inadequate organizational support that necessitates personal financial investment in human capital development. This theoretical combination provides a comprehensive framework for examining how institutional funding gaps influence individual career trajectories and the sustainability of academic professionalization in resource-constrained settings.

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of lecturers who personally financed the acquisition of postgraduate qualifications in Nigerian Federal

Colleges of Agriculture. The phenomenological approach was considered appropriate because the study sought to understand the meanings lecturers attach to funding gaps, institutional exclusion, self-sponsored qualification acquisition, and career progression within their professional environment.

The population of the study comprised academic staff of Federal Colleges of Agriculture in Nigeria who had either completed or were currently undertaking postgraduate programs through personal financing. Participants were selected through purposive sampling because the study required respondents with direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation. The selection criteria included lecturers who had personally funded or were personally funding postgraduate diplomas, master's degrees, doctoral degrees, or other professional qualifications required for promotion and career advancement.

Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with selected lecturers from Federal Colleges of Agriculture. The semi-structured interview format allowed the researcher to maintain focus on the research objectives while also giving participants the freedom to describe their personal experiences in detail. The interview questions focused on the nature of financial burden experienced by lecturers, their coping strategies, institutional support or lack thereof, promotion experiences, emotional and professional consequences of self-financing, and their future career intentions. Participants were encouraged to narrate their experiences freely, particularly in relation to how funding gaps affected their academic development and career progression.

The interviews provided firsthand accounts of lecturers' lived experiences and enabled the study to capture issues that may not be fully reflected in existing literature. The interviews revealed how lecturers interpreted self-financing not merely as an individual career decision, but as a response to institutional neglect and exclusion from formal staff development funding. Ethical considerations were observed by ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality of responses, and anonymity of participants. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and were assured that their responses would be used strictly for academic purposes.

Data obtained from the interviews were transcribed and subjected to thematic phenomenological analysis. The analysis followed an iterative process that involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts, identification of significant statements, coding of recurring ideas, clustering of related meanings, and development of shared experiential themes. Through this process, the study identified common patterns in participants' experiences of financial burden, delayed career progression, institutional injustice, emotional stress, and intentions to migrate to better-funded institutions. The phenomenological analysis enabled the researcher to move beyond simple description and interpret the deeper meanings attached to lecturer-financed qualification acquisition among academic staff in Federal Colleges of Agriculture.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study were derived from the in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with lecturers in Federal Colleges of Agriculture who had personally financed, or were in the process of personally financing postgraduate qualifications required for career advancement. The thematic phenomenological analysis of the interview data produced five major themes: self-financing as a survival strategy, financial sacrifice and coping mechanisms, delayed career progression, perceived institutional injustice, and migration intentions among lecturers.

Self-Financing as a Survival Strategy

A major theme that emerged from the interviews was that lecturer-financed qualification acquisition was experienced as a survival strategy rather than a voluntary career choice. Participants explained that higher qualifications were compulsory for promotion and long-term career growth, yet institutional support for acquiring such qualifications was either unavailable, inadequate, or delayed. As a result, many lecturers felt compelled to personally finance their postgraduate education in order to avoid career stagnation.

This finding shows that self-financing among lecturers in Federal Colleges of Agriculture is not simply an expression of personal ambition. Rather, it reflects a structural condition in which lecturers are required to meet promotion criteria without corresponding institutional or governmental support. This aligns with Human Capital Theory, which explains why individuals invest in education to improve their productivity and career prospects. However, in this context, the investment is made under pressure because failure to acquire higher qualifications may lead to delayed promotion, reduced professional relevance, and limited career mobility.

Financial Sacrifice and Coping Mechanisms

The interviews further revealed that lecturers experienced significant financial strain while pursuing self-funded postgraduate qualifications. Participants reported that they had to pay tuition fees, research expenses, transportation costs, accommodation costs, and other academic-related expenses from their personal income. For many lecturers, these expenses competed directly with family responsibilities, household needs, and other personal obligations.

Several coping mechanisms were identified during the interviews. Some lecturers relied on personal savings, while others obtained loans from cooperative societies, banks, friends, or family members. Some participants engaged in side economic activities to raise funds, while others prolonged their programs because they could not meet financial obligations on time. These coping strategies often created additional stress and affected their work-life balance.

This finding supports the argument that funding gaps transfer the cost of staff development from institutions to individual lecturers. While postgraduate qualification acquisition is beneficial to both the lecturer and the institution, the financial responsibility is disproportionately borne by the lecturer. The experience of participants therefore reflects a breakdown in the expected relationship between institutional career demands and institutional support structures.

Delayed Career Progression and Emotional Stress

Another important theme from the interviews was the connection between funding gaps and delayed career progression. Participants noted that promotion in Federal Colleges of Agriculture is strongly tied to the possession of higher academic qualifications. However, because many lecturers had to finance their studies personally, they often experienced delays in completing their programs. These delays, in turn, affected their promotion timelines and professional growth.

Participants described feelings of frustration, discouragement, and emotional stress arising from the gap between institutional expectations and available support. Some lecturers felt that they were being required to meet the same professional standards as colleagues in universities and polytechnics without enjoying the same level of access to staff development funding. This situation contributed to reduced morale and weakened institutional commitment.

The finding is consistent with Institutional Theory, which explains how formal rules and norms shape organizational behaviour. In this case, the institutional requirement for higher qualifications operates as a coercive pressure on lecturers. However, the absence of funding support creates an inequitable system in which career progression becomes dependent not only on merit and competence, but also on the lecturer's personal financial capacity.

Perceived Institutional Injustice and TETFund Exclusion

The exclusion of Federal Colleges of Agriculture from TETFund academic staff development interventions emerged as a strong concern among participants. Interview responses showed that lecturers perceived this exclusion as a form of institutional injustice. Participants compared their situation with that of lecturers in universities, polytechnics, and colleges of education who benefit from TETFund-supported postgraduate training and research development programs.

This perceived injustice reinforced a sense of marginalization among lecturers in Federal Colleges of Agriculture. Participants believed that their institutions perform important national functions in agricultural education, food security, and rural development, yet they are not given equal access to government-supported staff development opportunities. This finding demonstrates that the issue of self-financing is not merely personal or institutional, but also policy-related.

The phenomenological analysis revealed that lecturers attached deep emotional and professional meanings to TETFund exclusion. To many participants, exclusion from such interventions symbolized a lack of recognition of their role within Nigeria's tertiary education system. This perception has serious implications for motivation, institutional loyalty, and long-term retention.

Migration Intentions and Institutional Capacity

The interviews also revealed that many lecturers viewed self-financed postgraduate qualification acquisition as a pathway to mobility rather than long-term commitment to Federal Colleges of Agriculture. Some participants indicated that after obtaining higher qualifications, they would consider moving to universities, polytechnics, or other better-funded institutions where career progression and research opportunities are more favourable.

This finding has serious implications for institutional capacity. When lecturers finance their own qualifications and subsequently migrate to institutions with better support systems, Federal Colleges of Agriculture lose the human capital they indirectly helped to develop. This contributes to staff attrition, weakens departmental capacity, reduces research output, and may affect accreditation requirements.

The finding also highlights the paradox of lecturer-financed qualification acquisition. Although lecturers' postgraduate training improves their individual human capital, the absence of institutional support and retention incentives means that Federal Colleges of Agriculture may not fully benefit from this investment. This threatens the sustainability of agricultural education and undermines the ability of these colleges to fulfil their mandate.

The findings demonstrate that lecturer-financed qualification acquisition is a lived experience marked by financial burden, emotional stress, delayed promotion, institutional marginalization, and uncertain career commitment. The phenomenological analysis shows that lecturers interpret self-financing as both a personal investment and a forced response to systemic exclusion. Therefore, addressing the funding gap is essential not only for individual career progression, but also for the long-term sustainability of Federal Colleges of Agriculture in Nigeria.

Conclusion

The study concludes that lecturer-financed qualification acquisition in Nigerian Federal Colleges of Agriculture is a structurally induced response to persistent funding gaps, institutional exclusion, and limited access to formal staff development support. Evidence from the interviews conducted with lecturers shows that self-financing postgraduate education is experienced not merely as a voluntary investment in human capital, but as a compulsory survival strategy for avoiding career stagnation.

The phenomenological analysis revealed that lecturers attach significant meanings to their experiences of self-financing. These meanings include personal sacrifice, institutional neglect, delayed promotion, emotional stress, and uncertainty about continued commitment to their institutions. Although lecturers continue to invest in their own academic development in order to meet promotion requirements, the absence of adequate institutional and governmental support weakens morale, reduces institutional loyalty, and encourages migration to better-funded tertiary institutions.

The study further concludes that the exclusion of Federal Colleges of Agriculture from TETFund academic staff development interventions creates an inequitable career progression environment. Unless this funding gap is addressed, career advancement in these colleges will remain dependent on lecturers' personal financial capacity rather than merit, competence, or institutional need. This situation has serious implications for staff retention, institutional capacity, programme accreditation, and the sustainability of agricultural education in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The study recommends the formal inclusion of Federal Colleges of Agriculture in TETFund academic staff development programs to promote equity in career progression. Additionally, the establishment of dedicated staff development funds, interim institutional sponsorship schemes, and a review of promotion requirements to align with available support mechanisms are necessary to strengthen lecturer retention and institutional sustainability.

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Effective Election Administration and the Prospect of Democratic Consolidation in Nigeria

Uchechukwu Kizito Ogu PhD
Department of Educational Foundations
College of Education, Zing
ORCID: 0000-0002-8869-7804

Corresponding Author's Email:
ucheogu14@gmail.com

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Abstract

With authoritarianism fast losing its appeal as a system of government and democracy emerging as possibly the best form of government suited to allowing people live in dignity and freedom, nations across the globe particularly those that have exited authoritarian rule are taking measures to consolidate democracy and ensure that they do not return to the dark days of authoritarianism. One of such measures is elections which have come to be accepted as the best way to determine who rules. In Nigeria, elections have held periodically, every four years since the return to democratic rule in 1999. However, conducting free and fair elections that meet international standards has remain a daunting challenge with the outcomes of most elections hotly contested up to the Supreme Court. Elections in Nigeria have been characterized by vote buying, harassment of the opposition, manipulation of election figures and most dangerously the collusion of election managers INEC and SIECs with the ruling parties using State apparatuses to alter the democratic choices of the people. These and many other ills such as the failure of the government to deliver tangible dividends of democracy have led many to question the appropriateness of democracy for Nigeria and many even looking back nostalgically to military rule. It is against this backdrop, that this paper is birthed with recommendations that amendment that insulates INEC from undue executive influence so as to protect its independence and impartiality is an imperative.

Keywords: Elections, Election management, Democracy, Democratic Consolidation, Constitution.

Introduction

Ogu (2023) observed that no questions since the dawn of political thought have bothered political scholars, forming issues for debates and arguments than those pertaining to who should rule and how he should be determined. Since the Twentieth century, these questions have tended to elicit a single, almost universally accepted response which is that the people should govern either directly or through their representatives chosen freely through an election. No other political ideals have enjoyed the unquestioning approval even reverence currently enjoyed by both democracy and elections. Leaders everywhere, whether Communists, Fascists, Socialists, Liberals, Conservatives and so on are eager to proclaim their democratic credentials and to commit themselves to the democratic ideals and seek legitimacy for their governments through an election even when such offers the citizens/electorates no necessary alternatives for choice making. This is emphasized by the 1997 Universal Declaration on Democracy in which the international community undertook to promote democracy worldwide. The Declaration establishes democracy as a universal right based on the values of human rights, the rule of law and free and pluralistic elections and defines democracy as a governance system with transparent institutions, where power is accountable and citizens' participation is guaranteed.

In democracies, elections are essential ingredients that promote transition from one government to another and through them, the electorates decide who and which party administers the affairs of the country based upon their perceived conviction on the agenda presented in the manifestoes of the party. Oni *et al*, (2017) aver that elections provide citizens the space for free expression and offers governments unique opportunities for legitimacy and is recognized as a way of building trust in former authoritarian states and as Brown (2003 and Sisk (2008) note, a way to validate negotiated pacts.

Election has meaning for most people only in a democratic context, because it leads to the choice of decision makers by the majority. Even in stable democracies, election serves as a way of strengthening an already assumed perfect system (Majekodunmi and Adejuwon, 2012). Ashindorbe (2018) points out that elections are fundamental components and support systems in the democratic process as they underscore the principle of political or popular participation, accountability, legitimacy and freedom to choose, justice and rule of law.

This means that democracy and election are inextricably linked. The health of a democracy depends on the quality of elections that sustain it. In other words, election is one of the major signposts of a healthy democracy. Thus, elections do not only have to be periodic but must necessarily be free, fair and conducted through processes adjudged credible and transparent by all stakeholders. In Nigeria, elections have been one of the major problems of the consolidation process as conducting free, fair and credible elections have proven to be a very big challenge (Ogu, 2023). Omodia (2012) and Ojukwu and Oni (2016) note that the history of elections in Nigeria has been characterized by threats to statehood based on the manipulation of ethnicity as divisive mechanism for the acquisition of political power by political actors and the fragile nature of democratic cum political institutions which is acquainted with poor democratic culture among Nigerian citizens.

Elections in Nigeria have always been marred by rigging and fraud mostly arising from poor management of the election process by the administrators. The objective of this is to frustrate the democratic aspirations of citizens who have voted or would have voted into office someone other than the declared winner. The outcomes of many elections have been so fiercely contested that the survival of the democratic order has been compromised. The result is that the outcome of elections has been the subversion of the democratic process rather than its consolidation (Adekanye, 1990).

Nigeria's struggles for sustainable democracy have been so daunting that various attempts at democratization have achieved very little success. The collapse of the first two republics and the stuttering progress of the current Fourth Republic have largely been blamed on election rigging and fraud orchestrated by politicians across party divide aided by the election managers who collude with them to subvert the will of the people. In order to ensure that Nigeria does not revert to her painful past of authoritarian rule, there is need to promote the culture of transparent elections which outcomes satisfy every party. It is against this backdrop, that the nexus between effective election management and democratic consolidation is here examined.

Conceptual clarifications

Election

Because of the widespread support election has received as a basic element of democracy, it has received wide research coverage among scholars of different persuasion and orientation. It is an indispensable tool of democracy (Annan, 2015), designed to hold politicians accountable (Powell, 2000; Rudolph and Daubler, 2015). Oni (2016) refers to election as a popular means of attaining governmental power in modern political systems by which people vote for their preferred candidates or parties in a competitive manner. Through elections, therefore, the people exercise their sovereign rights to choose who governs them and what the priorities of the government should be. Thus, they afford the people to express their sovereignty through the ballot to confer legitimacy on their government, renew its mandate if necessary or withdraw from it the authority to govern (Ojukwu *et. al*., 2019).

Gwinn and Nortan (1992) view election as the formal process of selecting persons for public offices or accepting or registering a political proposition by voting. For them, election is one of the means by which a society organizes itself and makes specified formal decisions. They added that where voting is free, certain decisions regarding the power relations in a society is made and that the essence of a democratic election is freedom of choice.

As described by Dahl (1998), elections embody the principle of popular sovereignty where the authority of government is derived from the will of the people. It is for Lipjhart (1999), the primary instrument of democracy which enables the peaceful transfer of power and allows for citizens' participation in government decision-making. The process typically involves casting of votes to select representatives including legislators, executives and other public officials. For Obiyan and Afolabi (2013), election is a series of processes that result in choosing individuals from a larger group to occupy positions of authority. They argue that elections are effective tools for refining the functioning of democracy, establishing a representative government, and facilitating the transition of leadership.

According to Akindele (2011), elections involve much more than the events on Election Day; they are part of a broader process that includes activities before, during and after the election. This process encompasses the legal and constitutional framework, the registration of political parties, party primaries and campaigns, media access and coverage, campaign funding, the role of security agencies and most importantly, the action of the incumbent government.

Akzin (1960) avers that elections have technical and social significance. In the technical sense, he says they are the process through which an office or a post is assigned to a person by an act of volition that requires the simultaneous expression of many people's opinion. In the social sense, they involve the process through a person is linked to an office through the due participation of the people who will bear the weight of his or her authority. It is this social aspect of elections that generates the idea of governing a society with the consent of the governed and this is what distinguishes democracy from mere appointment.

Mackenzie (1967) identified four conditions needed for the conduct of a free and fair election:

i. An independent judiciary to interpret the electoral law;
ii. An honest, competent and non-partisan electoral body to manage the elections;
iii. A developed system of political parties;
iv. A general acceptance of the political community of the rules of the game.

According to Arnold and Roy (1998), elections have been seen as central to competitive politics. Ideally, they guarantee political participation and competition, which in turn are fundamental to democratic transition and consolidation.

Election Administration

Election administration is construed by Agbaje (1999) as the management of a parade of public affairs and events called the electoral process. Oni *et. al*., (2017) and Jinadu (1997) refer to it as the organization and conduct of elections to elective public mostly political offices by an electoral body. It involves a process of ensuring a free and fair selection of candidates to fill public offices, through well-coordinated actions by men and women aimed at achieving the goal of peaceful and orderly elections and transition from one government to another. As Ighodalo (2008) said, the overall objective of electoral administration is to ensure that democracy which is the foundation of elections is sustained as a mechanism for choosing the people's representatives at regular intervals. It is the mechanism of how elections are run, ranging from preparations for the election, to the methods by which people cast their votes to how winners are declared. It includes the organization of election agencies, the behavior and characteristics of election officials, the process of conducting elections and the interpretation of election policies. According to the Brennan Centre for Justice (2023), it is the management of the logistics of elections, particularly large democratic elections.

The various conceptualizations suggest that election administration is not restricted to what happens to Election Day only but includes activities starting before election such as registration of political parties, voters' registration, procurement of election materials, training of elections officials and post-election activities such as protests and contestation over the declared results leading to the search for justice in courts of law. The success of failure of litigation process also depends on the election managers to supply necessary election documents for litigants to support their applications.

The administration of elections varies substantially across democracies. Political institutions can determine the level of centralized control that a federal government exerts over election processes. For instances, in the United States, election administration is completely decentralized with thousands of jurisdictions having primary responsibility over their own electoral process while in Nigeria, election is largely controlled by the Independent National Electoral Commission, a federal commission. Elections may also be fundamentally more difficult to administer in some jurisdictions than in others; for example larger jurisdictions may require more sophisticated apparatuses for collection and counting votes (Kimball and Baybeck (2012).

Democratic Consolidation

Democratic consolidation refers to the process through which new democracies mature, become stable and enduring, deeply institutionalized and legitimized that they are unlikely to revert to authoritarianism. It involves the deepening of democratic institutions and practices and norms including establishing a strong and functional civil society, independent judiciary, rule of law, safeguards for the protection of human rights and a culture of political participation and competition among political parties for power.

It is a process that starts with the enthronement of democracy after a free and fair election and spans through the period when its probability of breakdown is very low and when its probability of survival is very high (Ojo, 2006). For Beetham (1994), democratic consolidation begins where the 'transition to democracy' ends, i.e., with the inauguration of a new government at the first free and fair elections since the end of pre-democratic regime. He notes that for democratic consolidation to happen, all political actors, relevant observers and the entire citizenry must express the optimism that the democratic regime can last into a foreseeable future, thereby having the capacity to build dams against what Huntington (1991) calls a 'reverse wake'.

The issue that needs to be resolved is how to identify a consolidated democracy, in other words, when do we say a democracy has been consolidated. Political scholars have identified two criteria critical to the foregoing discussion. The first is the 'two election test' also known as the 'transfer of power test'. This criterion argues that the probability of democratic survival is not high until and unless democratically elected regimes lose elections in subsequent contests and accept the verdicts (Ojo, 2006). Thus, democracy is not consolidated until a ruling party or class hands over power to an opposition party after losing the electoral contests. This scenario played out in 2015 when the Peoples Democratic Party and President Goodluck Jonathan handed over power to the All Progressive Congress and President Muhammed Buhari after losing the 2015 presidential election.

The second criterion is called the 'simple longevity or generation test' which argues that twenty years of regular competitive elections should be sufficient basis for adjudging a democracy consolidated even if power is not transferred from another political party or class. It is in this sense that one can classify Nigeria democracy as consolidated having conducted competitive elections regularly (7 in total) since the return to democratic rule in 1999. This criterion posits that continuous and regular elections would have created in people a mind-set that develops apathy for any near alternative to democracy. It is therefore unthinkable for the electorates to explore any other system other than democracy in running their affairs (Ojo, 2006). It is on the basis of this that Linz and Stepan (1996) define a consolidated democracy as a 'political regime in which democracy as a system of institutions, rules and patterned incentives and disincentives has become, in a phrase, "the only game in town".

The role of Elections in a Democracy

While democracy cannot be reduced entirely to elections or explained solely by elections, democracy cannot be discussed without reference to elections. If politics is about making decisions and implementing them, elections are the first decision; they determine how people are chosen and entrusted with the power to make those decisions through an institutionalized procedure and for a given period of time.

Elections ideally reflect and impact on the orderliness within society, and the stability, credibility and possibility of rejuvenating the political leadership through the change of decadent members of the elite and the advancement of the non-elite elements. Economically, when elections are properly conducted, they promote an environment of capital mobility and higher productivity, especially in a post-authoritarian and post-conflict political order in dire need of reconstruction and development. Villalon (1998) rightly argued that many African leaders have employ elections as strategy for maintaining power and forestalling change thereby maintaining the status quo. Pursuing these agenda, elections have produced quasi-democracies in Africa.

Apart from facilitating political succession, elections also promote political accountability. Elections enable voters to select their leaders and hold them accountable for their performances in office. The threat of defeat at the polls exerts pressure on those in power to conduct themselves in a responsible manner and take account of popular interests and demands when they take decisions. Accountability can be undermined when elected leaders do not care whether they are reelected or when, for historical or other reasons, one party as in the case with Nigeria or coalition is so dominant that there is effectively no choice for voters among alternative candidates, parties or policies.

Nevertheless, the possibility of controlling leaders by requiring them to submit to regular and periodic elections helps to solve the problem of succession in leadership and thus contributes to the continuation of democracy. Moreover, where the electoral process is competitive and forces candidates or parties to expose their records and future intentions to popular scrutiny, elections serve as forums for the discussion of public issues and facilitate the expression of public opinion. Elections thus provide political educations for citizens and ensure the responsiveness of democratic governments to the will of the people. They also serve to legitimize the acts of those in power.

Elections also reinforce the stability and legitimacy of the political community. They link citizens to each other and thereby confirm the viability of the polity. As a result, elections help to facilitate social and political integration which is needed mot just the development and stability of a nation.

Finally, elections serve as self-actualizing purpose by confirming the worth and dignity of individual citizens as human beings. Whatever other needs voters may have, participation in an election serves to reinforce their self-esteem and self-respect. Voting gives people an opportunity to have their say, it gives them voice and power (Agbaje and Adejumobi, 2006), and through expressing partisanship, to satisfy their need to feel a sense of belonging. Even nonvoting satisfies the need of some people to express their alienation from the political community. For precisely these reasons, the long battle for the right to vote and the demand for equality in electoral participation can be viewed as the manifestation of a profound human craving for personal fulfillment.

Overview of Elections in Post-Independence Nigeria

The development of electoral system in Nigeria can be divided into two main periods: colonial (1900-1959) and post-colonial (1960-date. The post-colonial period is here referred to as post-independence period and can be further divided into the First Republic (1960-1966), the Second Republic (1979-1983), the Third Republic (1993) and the Fourth Republic (1999-date).

Elections in Nigeria date back to September 1923 when general elections were held for the first time when the Clifford Constitution introduced the first elective rights in Nigeria which led to the formation of the first political party in the country called the Nigerian National Democratic Party (NNDP). The first elections to hold in post-independent Nigeria were the 1964/1965 parliamentary elections which reelected Sir Abubakar Tafawa Balewa as Prime Minister, a position he held till the first military coup in January, 1966 which brought to an end the First Republic.

The January 1966 coup triggered a series of further coups which delayed return to democratic rule till October 1979 bringing to birth the Second Republic. The first elections under the Second Republic were held in July and August 1979. The 1979 Constitution granted universal suffrage in Nigeria, reducing the voting age from 21 to 18 and extending voting rights to women across the country.

In 1983 another election was held in which the incumbent president Shehu Shagari won a second term. However, the Second republic was brought to an end in December 31st 1983 in a military coup led by Muhammed Buhari. General Ibrahim Babangida who took over from Muhammed Buhari in another coup in August 1985 made an attempt to return the country to democratic rule. The 1989 Constitution was drafted and parliamentary elections were held in 1992 while presidential elections were held in 12 June 1993. The unofficial election result suggested that Chief Moshood Abiola of the Social Democratic Party won. However, the National Electoral Commission (NEC) at the time refused to announce the result officially despite several court orders.

The annulment of the 1992 elections triggered a series of events such as protests and strikes particularly in the South West, the stepping aside from office by General Ibrahim Babangida and the constitution of an Interim National Government (ING) led by Chief Ernest Shonekan. The ING was in power only for three months before another military coup led by General Sani Abacha forced them out bringing to an abrupt end the Third Republic. General Abacha died in office in 1998 and General Abdulsalami Abubakar became Head of State and then ushered Nigeria's final return to democracy bringing to birth the current Fourth Republic.

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The first elections held under the Fourth Republic in February 27, 1999 which was won by Chief Olusegun Obasanjo of the Peoples Democratic Party defeating the candidate of the Alliance for Democracy (AD), Chief Olu Falae. The elections also produced state governors, members of the assemblies at both the federal and state levels. On April 19, 2003, the second elections in the Fourth Republic held produced the reelection of President Olusegun Obasanjo who defeated his closest rival Muhammed Buhari of the All Nigerian Peoples Party (ANPP). For the first time, Nigeria witnessed a staggered election cycle in which the presidential and national assembly elections were held before the gubernatorial and states houses of assembly's elections.

Since the 2003 general elections, Nigeria has witnessed 5 presidential and National Asembly elections held on the following days: April 27, 2007, April 16, 2011, March 28, 2015, February 23, 2019 and February 25, 2023. Similarly, gubernatorial and house of assembly elections have held including off cycle elections.

Appraisal of Elections under the Fourth Republic

To say election administration is one of the biggest challenges facing democratic consolidation in Nigeria is to say the least. Kurfi (2005) noted that major political conflicts have emerged around rigged elections. Ogu (2023) averred that elections are meaningfully democratic when among other things, they are free, fair, participatory, competitive and legitimate. They are credible when they are administered by a neutral body, when the administrator is sufficiently competent and resourceful; to take specific precautions against fraud, when the security agencies and courts treat competing candidates and parties impartially, when electoral rules do not grossly handicap the opposition, when procedures for organizing and counting the votes are transparently open and known to all and when there are transparent and impartial procedures for resolving election complaints and disputes.

In Nigeria, many of these procedures that make elections meaningfully democratic are not followed in the conduct of elections. Elections in the country have been characterized by snatching and stuffing of ballot boxes, falsification of election results, illegal thumb printing of ballot papers, underage voting, deliberate refusal to supply election materials to certain areas especially areas perceived to be the stronghold of the opposition, unauthorized announcement of results, vote buying, harassment and intimidation of candidates, agents and voters and so many other irregularities.

Candidates for elections in Nigeria particularly at the national level have always presented themselves as the champions of the values of their ethnic groups, religion and region. This is equally applicable to how Nigerians perceive political parties going back to the First Republic when political parties were formed and operated along ethnic lines, hence voting tended to follow this particular configuration. The political elites have latched onto religious, sectional, communal and tribal sentiments when faced with stiff political opposition. In the Fourth, no elections typically exemplify this manipulation of primordial consideration than the 2011, 2015 and 2019 presidential elections (Ogu, 2023).

The use of the so-called 'Federal Might' to win elections for mostly members of the ruling party has also called to question the credibility of elections in Nigeria. Presidents are known to manipulate the electoral systems to favour their friends and party loyalists. The history of elections in Nigeria has been a history of manipulation, concoction and inflation of figures by the executive controlled INEC aided by the security agencies (Ogu, 2023).

Conclusion and Recommendations

Researches have shown that no democracy thrives in the absence of credible and transparent procedures for determining who is assigned responsibility for the affairs of the state. When elections, which are the best system for selection of leaders are not credible and transparent, outcomes are questioned and violence may erupt like it happened in some parts of Northern Nigeria in the aftermath of the announcement of the results of the 2011 presidential election.

This paper has explored the nexus between effective election administration and democratic consolidation in Nigeria; it traced the history of elections in Nigeria and appraised the quality of elections particularly in the current Fourth Republic and found out that elections in the country have fallen short of international standards as a result of inherent structural and systemic weakness of the election of the election administrators.

Based on the foregoing, the following recommendations are made:

i. Constitutional amendments to insulate the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) from the executive arm of government/president in terms of its composition and funding. To ensure the independence and impartiality of INEC, the powers to appoint the chairman and members of the board should be transferred from the president to a body of eminent Nigerians comprising of past presidents, past Senate Presidents and Speakers of the House of Representatives (if they are currently not members of a sitting National Assembly), past Chief Justices of Nigeria, The funding of the commission should be a first line charge on the Consolidated Revenue of the Federation.

ii. Constitutional amendments that makes it mandatory for both presidential and governorship elections to hold on the same day which must be at least six months before the expiration of office of the current holders, Similarly, National Assembly and State houses of assembly elections should hold on same date perhaps two months after the presidential and governorship elections .

iii. An enactment into law of a bill prohibiting any elected person from being sworn into office until all cases against his election has been disposed of properly in the court of law. This is to ensure that the person does not use his office to influence the outcomes of the litigations. This demands that the number of tribunals dealing with election related cases be increased and with a reduction in the number of judges that sit on them. This will ensure speedy disposal of cases.

iv. Establishing of Election Offences Tribunal to deal strictly with violations of the Constitution and Electoral Act.

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Cybersecurity Knowledge Deficits, Information Management Failures, and Organizational Moderators Among Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises in Lagos, Nigeria

Abstract

This study evaluated the effect of cybersecurity awareness on the information management practices of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in Lagos, Nigeria. A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted, with data collected from 331 valid respondents drawn from SMEs across three major Lagos business districts using a multistage stratified sampling technique. The adapted Human Aspects of Information Security Questionnaire (HAIS-Q) served as the primary data collection instrument. Findings revealed a moderate overall cybersecurity awareness level (M = 3.03) among SME employees, with incident reporting constituting the most acutely deficient focus area. Information management practices were found to be broadly inadequate (M = 2.41), with incident response, backup and recovery recording the most severe deficits. A statistically significant, moderately strong positive relationship was established between cybersecurity awareness and information management practices (r = 0.618, p < .001), with awareness accounting for approximately 38% of the variance in practice scores. Hierarchical moderated regression analysis revealed that training availability, leadership support, and formal cybersecurity policy significantly amplify the behavioral dividend of higher awareness levels, while resource constraints attenuate it. The study concluded that awareness is a pivotal but institutionally conditioned determinant of information management quality in Lagos SMEs.

Keywords: Cybersecurity awareness, information management practices, Protection Motivation Theory, HAIS-Q

Jude Chinonso Njoku
Shorelands British Academy
0009-0004-2264-8235

Ugonna Onyedikachukwu Chukwueke
Ahmadu Bello University Zaria
0009-0005-8601-9857

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Introduction

Small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) occupy a peculiar and increasingly vulnerable position in the global digital landscape. They are, on the one hand, the backbone of most developing economies, contributing substantially to employment, gross domestic product, and industrial diversification, while on the other hand, they remain disproportionately exposed to cybersecurity risks owing to constrained resources, limited technical expertise, and inadequate institutional frameworks for protecting the information assets that underpin their operations (Bada & Nurse, 2019; Ngoqo & Flowerday, 2015). As business processes become ever more reliant on digital technologies, the manner in which SMEs manage their information; how it is collected, stored, processed, shared, and protected increasingly determines their operational resilience, competitive viability, and long-term sustainability.

Cybersecurity awareness, broadly defined as the extent to which individuals within an organization understand, appreciate, and act in accordance with the security risks, policies, and protective behaviours relevant to their digital environment, has emerged as a foundational element of effective information management (Parsons *et al.*, 2017; Tran *et al.*, 2021). Information management, in turn, encompasses the systematic governance of an organization's information resources throughout their entire lifecycle, including the acquisition, organization, maintenance, retrieval, dissemination, and disposal of information in ways that support organizational objectives, regulatory compliance, and stakeholder accountability (Choo, 2014; Liao *et al.*, 2021). When employees lack adequate awareness of cybersecurity threats and best practices, information management systems become susceptible to breaches, unauthorized access, data corruption, and a host of other vulnerabilities that can fundamentally undermine an organization's information integrity and operational continuity (Siponen & Vance, 2010; Zwilling *et al.*, 2022).

Ransomware attacks, phishing campaigns, social engineering exploits, insider threats, and sophisticated malware have proliferated at a pace that has consistently outrun the defensive capabilities of most organizations, particularly those operating with limited cybersecurity budgets and expertise (ENISA, 2023; IBM Security, 2023). The consequences of cybersecurity incidents are often disproportionately severe for SMEs. A single significant breach can result in financial losses, reputational damage, loss of customer trust, regulatory penalties, and in some cases, business closure (Bada & Nurse, 2019; Alahmari & Duncan, 2020). The National Bureau of Statistics (2021) estimates that SMEs account for approximately 96% of all businesses and contribute nearly 50% of Nigeria's gross domestic product. Lagos, as Nigeria's commercial capital and the largest city in sub-Saharan Africa, hosts the highest concentration of SMEs across multiple sectors, including fintech, retail, manufacturing, professional services, media, healthcare, and logistics (LCCI, 2022). The rapid digitalization of business operations in Lagos has dramatically increased the volume and sensitivity of digital information that SMEs now manage daily, yet this has not been matched by commensurate growth in cybersecurity awareness or information management sophistication, leaving a significant and widening vulnerability gap (Aderibigbe *et al.*, 2022).

Statement of the Problem

Despite growing scholarly attention to cybersecurity in organizations, studies specifically evaluating how cybersecurity awareness shapes information management practices within SMEs in Nigeria remain limited. Studies show that while 89.8% of Nigerian SMEs are aware of the term "cybersecurity," only 9.1% have received formal training (Ngoqo & Flowerday, 2015; Aderibigbe *et al.*, 2022). Most available studies either focus on large enterprises or examine cybersecurity practices without adequately examining their downstream effects on information management quality and outcomes. This study addresses the identified gap by systematically evaluating the effect of cybersecurity awareness on information management practices of SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria.

Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

1. What is the level of cybersecurity awareness among employees of SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria?
2. What are the prevailing information management practices of SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria?
3. What is the effect of cybersecurity awareness on the information management practices of SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria?
4. What organizational factors moderate the relationship between cybersecurity awareness and information management practices in SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria?

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To assess the level of cybersecurity awareness among employees of SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria.
2. To examine the prevailing information management practices of SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria.
3. To evaluate the effect of cybersecurity awareness on the information management practices of SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria.
4. To identify the organizational factors that moderate the relationship between cybersecurity awareness and information management practices in SMEs in Lagos, Nigeria.

Literature Review

Cybersecurity Awareness

Cybersecurity awareness is not a monolithic construct but a multidimensional one encompassing cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral dimensions that together determine how effectively individuals contribute to, or undermine, the security of an organization's information systems (Parsons *et al*., 2017; Zwilling *et al.*, 2022). At the cognitive level, cybersecurity awareness encompasses an individual's knowledge of the types of cyber threats that exist, their understanding of how these threats are manifested in everyday digital interactions, and their familiarity with organizational policies, procedures, and best practices (Tran *et al*., 2021). This includes awareness of threat categories such as phishing, social engineering, ransomware, malware, and insider threats, as well as an understanding of how individual behaviors such as clicking on unfamiliar links, using weak passwords, or accessing organizational systems through unsecured networks can expose the organization to these threats. Cognitive cybersecurity knowledge is a necessary, though not sufficient, precondition for protective behavior (Bulgurcu *et al*., 2010; Parsons *et al*., 2017).

The attitudinal dimension refers to the beliefs, values, and orientations that individuals hold toward cybersecurity and toward the protective behaviors that security policies prescribe. Employees who hold positive attitudes toward cybersecurity tend to perceive security-compliant behaviors as worthwhile and consistent with their professional responsibilities, whereas those with negative attitudes may view security requirements as burdensome or unnecessary (Siponen & Vance, 2010). The behavioral dimension encompasses the actual security-related actions and habits that employees exhibit in their day-to-day work such as use of strong passwords, proper handling of sensitive data, recognition and reporting of phishing attempts, and observance of access control protocols (Zwilling *et al*., 2022). The gap between stated security intentions and actual behavior, termed the "knowing-doing gap," remains a persistent challenge that underscores the complexity of translating cognitive awareness into reliable security behavior (Beautement *et al*., 2016; Parsons *et al*., 2017). Unlike large corporations, SMEs rarely have dedicated information security departments, making each employee's awareness level proportionally more consequential as fewer institutional defense layers exist to compensate for individual lapses (Bada & Nurse, 2019; Alahmari & Duncan, 2020).

Information Management Practices

Information management practices refer to the systematic organizational processes, procedures, and behaviors through which enterprises acquire, organize, store, protect, retrieve, share, and dispose of information assets throughout their lifecycle in ways that support operational objectives, ensure data integrity and availability, and promote compliance with applicable regulatory requirements (Choo, 2014; Liao *et al.*, 2021). Data classification involves the categorization of information according to its sensitivity, value, and regulatory obligations, enabling organizations to apply appropriate levels of protection to different categories of data (Choo, 2014). Access control refers to the policies and technical mechanisms through which an organization regulates who can access specific information assets, under what conditions, and for what purposes (Siponen & Vance, 2010). In SMEs, it is frequently under-implemented, with employees granted broader system access than their roles require (Alahmari & Duncan, 2020).

Backup and recovery procedures directly determine an organization's ability to maintain operational continuity in the face of cybersecurity incidents or data loss events (IBM Security, 2023). Incident response practices encompass the organizational processes through which cybersecurity incidents are detected, reported, contained, investigated, and resolved (ENISA, 2023). In SMEs, incident response is frequently informal and reactive, with many organizations lacking documented incident response plans, defined response roles, or post-incident review processes (Alahmari & Duncan, 2020). Regulatory compliance behaviors relate to adherence to the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (2019) and the Nigeria Data Protection Act (2023), both of which impose specific obligations on organizations processing personal data, including requirements for consent, data minimization, storage limitation, security safeguards, and breach notification (Abdulrauf, 2021). Compliance among SMEs remains limited, reflecting limited awareness of regulatory requirements, inadequate technical capacity, and limited enforcement action by supervisory authorities (Abdulrauf, 2021; Aderibigbe *et al*., 2022).

Theoretical Framework

This study is primarily anchored on Protection Motivation Theory (PMT), originally formulated by Rogers (1975) and subsequently applied extensively in the information security domain to explain cybersecurity awareness and compliance behavior (Herath & Rao, 2009; Ifinedo, 2012; Liang & Xue, 2010). According to PMT, individuals facing a potential threat engage in two parallel appraisal processes. One is threat appraisal, through which the individual evaluates the severity and probability of harm if no protective action is taken while the other is coping appraisal, through which the individual evaluates the efficacy of the recommended protective response (response efficacy) and their confidence in their own ability to implement that response (self-efficacy). Protection motivation arises from the interaction of these appraisal processes and drives the adoption of protective information security behaviors (Rogers, 1975). PMT is particularly relevant here because it places individual cognitive appraisal at the center of security behavior, explains why awareness alone is insufficient to guarantee security-compliant behavior, and provides a framework for understanding how organizational conditions enable or constrain the path from awareness to action.

The study also draws on General Deterrence Theory (GDT), which posits that individuals are deterred from engaging in harmful or prohibited behaviors when they perceive that such behaviors are likely to be detected (certainty of sanction) and that the consequences of detection are sufficiently severe (severity of sanction) (D'Arcy *et al*., 2009; Siponen & Vance, 2010). In the SME context, formal deterrence mechanisms are often weak or absent. Many SMEs lack security monitoring infrastructure, minimal formal disciplinary frameworks, and operate in institutional cultures where policy enforcement is inconsistent. Under these conditions, individual cybersecurity awareness and internalized security values become even more important as motivational foundations for security-compliant information management behavior.

Effect of Awareness on Information Management and Organizational Moderators

The relationship between cybersecurity awareness and information management practices is well-established empirically. Employees who receive training on data classification principles are more likely to correctly identify the sensitivity of information they handle and apply appropriate storage and handling procedures (Parsons *et al*., 2017; Liao *et al*., 2021). Higher awareness is associated with stronger adherence to access control protocols, higher incident reporting rates, and shorter detection delays (Bulgurcu *et al*., 2010; IBM Security, 2023; ENISA, 2023). Organizations in which employees are aware of ransomware attacks and data loss events are more likely to maintain regular backup routines and verify backup completeness (IBM Security, 2023).

However, the awareness–behavior relationship is moderated by organizational factors. Leadership commitment creates an institutional environment in which employee awareness more readily translates into protective behavior (Bada & Nurse, 2019; Tran *et al.,* 2021). Formal cybersecurity policies provide behavioral frameworks that channel awareness-motivated intentions into specific prescribed actions. Without formal policies, even highly aware employees may be uncertain what their organization specifically requires (Bulgurcu *et al*., 2010; Siponen & Vance, 2010). Resource constraints create a ceiling effect. Employees cannot implement technically demanding security measures if the organization has not invested in enabling infrastructure (Alahmari & Duncan, 2020). Organizational security culture, the shared values and norms shaping how employees respond to security requirements, amplifies the translation of awareness into behavior in supportive environments and suppresses it in indifferent ones (Da Veiga & Eloff, 2010). The level of investment in formal, structured security awareness training is also consistently superior to informally acquired awareness in motivating security-compliant information management behavior (Parsons et al., 2017; Tran *et al.*, 2021).

Methodology

Research Design and Population

A quantitative descriptive survey design was adopted, enabling the systematic collection of data from a representative sample using standardized instruments capable of generating data amenable to statistical analysis and generalization (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The target population comprised employees of registered SMEs operating within Lagos State, Nigeria, defined in accordance with the SMEDAN classification as organizations employing between 10 and 199 workers and generating annual turnover between ten million and one billion naira. The study focused on SMEs registered with the Lagos Chamber of Commerce and Industry (LCCI) and operating within three major business districts: Lagos Island, Victoria Island/Ikoyi, and Ikeja.

Sample Size, Sampling, and Instrument

A multistage stratified sampling technique was employed, combining stratification by business district for proportional geographic representation with simple random selection of SMEs within each stratum. Table 1 presents the sample allocation.

Table 1
Sample Allocation by Business District

Business District	Sample (n)
Lagos Island	118
Victoria Island/Ikoyi	120
Ikeja	116
Total	354

Source: field (2026).

The primary instrument was a structured questionnaire adapted from the Human Aspects of Information Security Questionnaire (HAIS-Q) validated by Parsons *et al.* (2017). The HAIS-Q is a psychometrically validated instrument designed to measure cybersecurity awareness across knowledge, attitudes, and behavioral intention dimensions across seven focus areas: password management, email use, internet use, social media use, mobile computing, incident reporting, and information handling. The questionnaire comprised five sections: Section A (demographics); Section B (cybersecurity awareness, 35 items across seven focus areas); Section C (information management practices, 25 items across five sub-dimensions); Section D (perceived effect of awareness on practices, 15 items); and Section E (organizational moderating factors, 24 items). All Sections B–E used a five-point

Likert scale (5 = Strongly Agree; 1 = Strongly Disagree) with a criterion mean of 2.50. Content validity was established through expert review by three Information Science academics. A pilot study with 40 employees in Surulere confirmed internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's α ≥ 0.70 across all sections; Nunnally, 1978). Data were analyzed using SPSS version 27 with descriptive statistics, Pearson product-moment correlation, simple linear regression, and hierarchical moderated multiple regression (significance threshold: $p < .05$).

Results

Response Rate and Demographic Profile

Of 354 questionnaires distributed, 331 were returned and deemed valid, yielding a response rate of 93.50%, substantially exceeding the 70% benchmark (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Males constituted 54.68% of the sample; females 45.32%. The dominant age cohort was 26–35 years (36.56%), followed by 36–45 years (31.12%). Bachelor's degree holders dominated the sample at 43.20%; only 2.72% held professional cybersecurity certifications. Administrative staff formed the largest occupational cluster (29.31%), followed by sales and marketing staff (24.77%); technical and IT staff comprised only 12.99%. Fintech and financial services organizations supplied the largest sectoral representation (22.36%). The majority of respondents occupied non-technical roles, precisely the segments of the SME workforce most likely to serve as inadvertent vectors for cybersecurity breaches through everyday behavioral lapses (Verizon, 2023).

Level of Cybersecurity Awareness (Research Question 1)

Table 2 presents the aggregated means and standard deviations for each cybersecurity awareness focus area.

Table 2

Cybersecurity Awareness by Focus Area

Focus Area	No. Items	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Password Management	5	3.41	0.84	Moderate
Email Use	5	3.17	0.91	Moderate
Internet Use	5	3.09	0.87	Moderate
Social Media Use	5	2.86	0.93	Low-Moderate
Mobile Computing	5	2.94	0.89	Low-Moderate
Incident Reporting	5	2.73	0.96	Low
Information Handling	5	3.02	0.88	Moderate
Overall Cybersecurity Awareness	35	3.03	0.61	Moderate

Note. Criterion mean = 2.50. Scores < 2.50 = Low; 2.50–3.49 = Moderate; ≥ 3.50 = High. Source: Field Survey (2026).

The overall cybersecurity awareness mean of 3.03 (*SD* = 0.61) is above the criterion threshold of 2.50, indicating a moderate but by no means robust awareness level across the study population. Password management returns the highest focus-area mean (*M* = 3.41, *SD* = 0.84), reflecting familiarity with password-strength concepts attributable to the ubiquity of password-creation prompts in everyday digital platforms. Email use follows (*M* = 3.17, *SD* = 0.91), consistent with relatively broad public discourse around phishing threats. Incident reporting is the weakest focus area (*M* = 2.73, *SD* = 0.96). This is a particularly consequential finding given that the capacity to recognize and report security incidents is the organizational last line of defence in many SME environments lacking automated threat detection. Item-level analysis reveals a stark knowing-doing gap within this focus area. Knowing the conceptual importance of prompt reporting (*M* = 3.41) coexisted with a deeply below-criterion mean of 1.98 for the behavioral item on whether respondents would actually report an uncertain incident immediately. Knowing who to contact also fell below criterion (*M* = 2.31). These findings align with Zwilling *et al*. (2022) and Parsons *et al*. (2017), who found that incident reporting and information handling consistently recorded the lowest HAIS-Q awareness scores across organizational samples. Siponen and Vance (2010) recognize this pattern as an instance of neutralization-driven non-compliance, in which employees understand the requirement but rationalize inaction through appeals to ambiguity, time pressure, or diffusion of responsibility.

Prevailing Information Management Practices (Research Question 2)

Table 3 presents the sub-dimension means for information management practices.

Table 3

Information Management Practices by Sub-Dimension

Sub-Dimension	No. Items	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Data Classification and Storage	5	2.47	0.94	Low
Access Control	5	2.63	0.88	Moderate
Backup and Recovery	5	2.31	0.97	Low
Incident Response	5	2.19	0.99	Low
Regulatory Compliance	5	2.44	0.91	Low
Overall Information Management	25	2.41	0.73	Low

Note. Criterion mean = 2.50. Source: Field Survey (2026).

The overall information management mean of 2.41 (*SD* = 0.73) falls below the criterion threshold, indicating that prevailing information management practices are, in aggregate, inadequate. Four of five sub-dimensions' record below-criterion means. Access control is the sole exception (*M* = 2.63, *SD* = 0.88), partially explained by everyday digital platform design reinforcing access control norms (Siponen & Vance, 2010). Incident response returns the weakest sub-dimension mean (*M* = 2.19, *SD* = 0.99); every item falls below criterion, with the lowest being 2.07 for the item that documented incident response plans are largely absent. For backup and recovery, only the existence of regular backup schedules (*M* = 2.58) exceeds criterion. Periodic testing of backups (*M* = 2.09) is acutely deficient. The ENISA (2023) threat landscape report specifically identifies this gap. Organizations that maintain backups without testing maintain a false sense of security, as untested backups frequently fail at the moment of greatest need. These findings are consistent with Alahmari and Duncan (2020), who found that backup and recovery preparedness and incident response capability were consistently the most underdeveloped information management dimensions across small organizations globally, and with Aderibigbe *et al.* (2022), who documented comparable deficits across Nigerian SME populations.

Effect of Cybersecurity Awareness on Information Management Practices (Research Question 3)

Respondents' perceptions of the directional relationship between cybersecurity awareness and information management yielded an overall mean of 3.31 (SD = 0.71), above the criterion threshold. The effect was most strongly perceived in the domain of access control (M = 3.47, SD = 0.87), where awareness of credential-sharing risks most directly influences protective behaviors. Table 4 presents the Pearson product-moment correlation and simple linear regression results.

Table 4

Pearson Correlation and Simple Linear Regression: Cybersecurity Awareness Predicting Information Management Practices

	B	Std. Error	β	t	p
(Constant)	0.627	0.188	–	3.336	< .001
Cybersecurity Awareness	0.589	0.061	0.618	9.656	< .001

Note. Pearson r = 0.618, p < .001; R^2 = .382; Adjusted R^2 = .380; F(1, 329) = 93.24, p < .001. N = 331. Source: Field Survey (2026).

The Pearson correlation of *r* = 0.618 is statistically significant at *p* < .001, indicating a moderately strong positive linear relationship. Respondents with higher aggregate awareness scores consistently report more robust information management practice across all five sub-dimensions. The regression model is statistically significant (*F*(1, 329) = 93.24, *p* < .001), and the R^2 value of .382 indicates that cybersecurity awareness accounts for approximately 38.2% of the variance in information management practice scores. The unstandardized coefficient *B* = 0.589 means that for each one-unit increase in the cybersecurity awareness scale, information management practice scores increase by 0.589 units. This is a practically meaningful effect. This finding is directly consistent with Protection Motivation Theory (Rogers, 1975), which posits that higher threat appraisal and coping appraisal motivate more protective organizational behaviors. Tran *et al.* (2021)

reported a comparably strong awareness-behavior correlation (*r* = 0.59) in Vietnamese organizational samples, and Bulgurcu *et al.* (2010) found that awareness of security policy requirements was among the strongest predictors of information security compliance intention. The 61.8% of unexplained variance points clearly to the role of the organizational moderating factors.

Organizational Moderating Factors (Research Question 4)

Table 5 presents the hierarchical moderated multiple regression results. Descriptive statistics for the six organizational factors show that cybersecurity training availability (M = 2.17, SD = 0.98) and formal cybersecurity policies (M = 2.39, SD = 1.01) both fall below criterion, indicating that the two most foundational institutional enablers of awareness-to-behavior translation are absent or severely underdeveloped. The resource constraint factor (M = 3.61, SD = 0.89) is the single factor to return a high mean, indicating near-consensus that financial and staffing limitations impede adequate cybersecurity implementation regardless of individual intent.

Table 5

Hierarchical Moderated Regression: Organizational Moderators of the Awareness–IM Relationship

Predictor	Step 1 B (β)	Step 2 B (β)	Step 3 B (β)
Cybersecurity Awareness	0.589 (.618)**	0.411 (.432)**	0.397 (.417)**
Leadership Support	–	0.214 (.196)**	0.187 (.171)*
Formal Cybersecurity Policies	–	0.186 (.172)*	0.163 (.151)*
Training Availability	–	0.241 (.213)**	0.228 (.202)**
Security Culture	–	0.173 (.161)*	0.149 (.139)*
Technical Infrastructure	–	0.138 (.128)	0.119 (.110)
Resource Constraints (inverse)	–	−0.197 (−.182)**	−0.181 (−.167)*
Awareness × Leadership (E1)	–	–	0.143 (.129)*
Awareness × Policies (E2)	–	–	0.137 (.124)*
Awareness × Training (E3)	–	–	0.189 (.172)**
Awareness × Security Culture (E4)	–	–	0.121 (.109)
Awareness × Infrastructure (E5)	–	–	0.097 (.088)
Awareness × Resources (E6)	–	–	−0.114 (−.103)
R^2	.382	.541	.572
ΔR^2	.382**	.159**	.031*

Note. *p < .05; **p < .01. *Standardized coefficients (β) in parentheses. N = 331. Source: Field Survey (2026).*

The introduction of organizational moderators in Step 2 substantially improves model fit ($\Delta R^2 = .159$, $p < .01$), with the model now accounting for 54.1% of the variance in information management practices. Leadership support ($B = 0.214$, $p < .01$), training availability ($B = 0.241$, $p < .01$), formal policies ($B = 0.186$, $p < .05$), and security culture ($B = 0.173$, $p < .05$) all contribute positively and significantly. Resource constraints exert a negative and significant effect ($B = -0.197$, $p < .01$), confirming that organizational resource limitations directly attenuate information management quality. Technical infrastructure does not achieve significance, suggesting its effect is largely mediated through the other organizational variables. The introduction of interaction terms in Step 3 adds a further 3.1% of explained variance ($\Delta R^2 = .031$, $p < .05$), confirming that organizational factors genuinely moderate, not merely add to, the translation of individual awareness into organizational practice. The strongest significant interaction is between awareness and training availability ($B = 0.189$, $p < .01$): the behavioral dividend of awareness is considerably larger in organizations that provide formal training than in those that do not. Awareness interactions with leadership support ($B = 0.143$, $p < .05$) and formal policies ($B = 0.137$, $p < .05$) also produce significant amplification effects.

Discussion

The aggregate cybersecurity awareness mean of 3.03 is above the criterion threshold, yet several of the most operationally consequential awareness dimensions particularly knowing who to contact when a breach is suspected ($M = 2.31$) and the behavioral willingness to report an uncertain incident immediately ($M = 1.98$) fall well below criterion at the item level. The data describe a population that knows, in the abstract, that cyber threats exist and that passwords should be strong, but that has not been equipped with the specific, procedural, and behaviorally embedded knowledge needed to translate that general orientation into reliable protective action under real operational conditions. This distinction between declarative and procedural awareness is analytically vital. Parsons *et al*. (2017) demonstrated that declarative knowledge scores consistently outperformed behavioral intention and practice scores across all seven HAIS-Q focus areas, and Zwilling *et al*. (2022) found this knowing-doing gap to be the most persistent and cross-culturally consistent feature of organizational cybersecurity awareness profiles across six national contexts. The particular weakness of incident reporting awareness reflects not only a motivational gap but also a structural one. An employee cannot report a suspected incident through a channel that has not been established, contact a security officer who has not been appointed, or follow a procedure that has not been documented (Ngoqo & Flowerday, 2015).

The finding that overall information management practices fall below criterion is concerning but unsurprising given the structural characteristics of the SME operating environment. SMEs lack dedicated IT security staff, their information governance arrangements are informal, and they have rarely invested in the documented frameworks such as incident response plans, recovery procedures, backup testing protocols that transform individual awareness-motivated intentions into institutionalized organizational behaviors (Alahmari & Duncan, 2020; Bada & Nurse, 2019). The sub-threshold mean for data classification and storage (M = 2.47) is particularly consequential in view of the Nigeria Data Protection Regulation (2019) and the Nigeria Data Protection Act (2023), since data classification is the foundational prerequisite for implementing most regulatory compliance obligations. An organization that cannot systematically identify which of its data assets are personal, sensitive, or subject to special handling requirements cannot meaningfully implement data minimization, storage limitation, or security safeguard obligations (Abdulrauf, 2021).

The Pearson correlation of r = 0.618 and the regression coefficient B = 0.589 jointly confirm that cybersecurity awareness is a substantively significant predictor of information management quality and not merely statistically significant. A unit increase in the awareness scale produces a nearly 0.6-unit improvement in the information management practice score. The PMT framework explains the mechanism. As threat appraisal increases and employees genuinely understand the severity and probability of cyber threats, coping appraisal increases as they develop confidence in their ability to implement protective responses. Protection motivation rises and translates into more consistent information management behavior (Rogers, 1975; Herath & Rao, 2009). Nonetheless, the 38.2% of explained variance is both practically significant and theoretically honest. Hence, awareness is not the only thing that matters. IBM Security (2023) found that the most impactful security interventions are those that combine awareness enhancement with organizational structural enablers like training, policy, leadership, and infrastructure rather than treating them as alternatives. The regression data are a statistical instantiation of that finding.

The moderating analysis shows that training availability produces the strongest significant interaction with cybersecurity awareness (B = 0.189, $p < .01$). In organizations where formal cybersecurity training is provided, the behavioral dividend of awareness is substantially larger than in organizations where training is absent. Bada and Nurse

(2019) specifically identified this amplification effect, arguing that training converts latent awareness into operationalized practice by providing the procedural scaffolding, role-specific guidance, and organizational context that raw knowledge cannot supply. Leadership support ($B = 0.143$, $p < .05$) is equally resonant. Da Veiga and Eloff (2010) found that leadership commitment was the single most powerful organizational antecedent of employee security behavior across all governance dimensions they examined. The significantly negative effect of resource constraints ($B = -0.197$, $p < .01$) represents what Alahmari and Duncan (2020) described as the "infrastructure ceiling effect". This is the point at which individual awareness motivation collides with an organizational environment that cannot support the behaviors it motivates. The absence of formal cybersecurity policies ($M = 2.39$) is analytically significant for the GDT framework. Without formal policies, even highly aware employees may be uncertain about what their organization specifically requires, leading to inconsistent and improvised security practice (D'Arcy *et al*., 2009; Siponen & Vance, 2010). This policy vacuum, the norm rather than the exception across sampled SMEs, may explain why aggregate information management practice scores remain below threshold despite an above-criterion aggregate awareness level.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study demonstrates that cybersecurity awareness among Lagos SME employees is moderate in aggregate but uneven in distribution, and that information management practices are broadly inadequate, with the most consequential deficits concentrated in incident response and backup and recovery. The effect of awareness on practice is real, statistically robust, and practically consequential. Cybersecurity awareness accounts for approximately 38% of the variance in information management practice scores, a meaningful effect that directly justifies investment in awareness enhancement as an organizational strategy. But awareness alone is not sufficient. The organizational conditions that amplify or suppress the behavioral yield of awareness like training, policy, leadership, and resource capacity are the decisive variables that explain why SMEs with comparable awareness levels can exhibit dramatically different information management outcomes. The SME employees captured in this study are not passive or indifferent. They hold moderate awareness, acknowledge the relevance of cybersecurity to their work, and perceive a positive relationship between what they know and how they manage information. What they lack is the institutional partnership such as training programs, documented policies, leadership modeling, and adequate resources that would convert individual motivation into sustained, organization-wide protective practice.

Four recommendations follow directly from the findings. First, SME owners and managers should institutionalize structured cybersecurity awareness training, given that training availability produces the strongest moderating amplification of awareness. Secondly, SMEs should develop and formally promulgate documented cybersecurity policies. The absence of formal policies creates a behavioral vacuum that weakens the deterrence value of even high individual awareness. Thirdly, SME leadership should visibly champion cybersecurity as an organizational priority by allocating resources for awareness investment, enforcing security policies consistently, and modeling security-compliant behavior. Lastly, incident response plans and backup testing protocols should be prioritized as immediate operational investments given the acute deficits recorded across these sub-dimensions.

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Guessing Behaviour of Multiple Choice Test Items: An Item Response Theory Analysis Using the 3pl-Model for 2019–2021 National Business And Technical Certificate Biology Examinations in Nigeria

Abstract

Guessing remains one of the most persistent psychometric threats to the validity of multiple-choice test scores in large-scale standardised examinations. This paper examined the guessing parameter (c-parameter) of the 2019, 2020 and 2021 National Business and Technical Certificate Examination (NABTCE) Biology Multiple Choice Test (MCT) items in Three-parameter Logistic (3PL) Item Response Theory (IRT) model. The sampling method was a multistage probability sampling whereby it was used to obtain 24,707 candidates out of a target population of 79,809 students across the six geopolitical zones of Nigeria. Winsteps 3.75.0 software was used in calibration of data. It was revealed that 98 percent, 94 percent and 100 percent of items in 2019, 2020 and 2021, respectively, met the acceptable guessing threshold of 0.25 on four-option Multiple Choice Tests. One-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) showed the significant difference in the estimates of parameter guessing in three examination years (F = 3.228, p = 0.004) as significant. These findings demonstrated commendable psychometric quality of the NABTCE Biology Multiple Choice Test items. This paper suggested compulsory pre-administration IRT calibration, reconstruction of flagged items with specificity, and incorporation of guessing parameter analysis in the policy of national assessment in order to ensure integrity of the outcomes of Biology education in Nigeria.

Keywords: Guessing parameter, Item response theory, 3PL model, Multiple-choice items, NABTCE, Biology assessment

Otasowie Ogiemwonyi, Ph.D.
Department of Educational Evaluation and Counselling Psychology
Faculty of Education, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

Prof. Osamede Kingsley Omorogiuwa
Department of Educational Evaluation and Counselling Psychology
Faculty of Education, University of Benin, Benin City, Nigeria

ORCID ID: 0009-0008-0632-4395

Corresponding Author's Email: ogieotasowie@gmail.com

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Introduction

Standardised assessments on a large scale assume a central role in defining educational paths, policy choices and qualification of skills, both in academic and professional aspects. In Nigeria, the National Business and Technical Certificate Examination (NABTCE) administered by the National Business and Technical Examinations Board (NABTEB) plays this very important role among students of technical and vocational education. Each year hundreds of thousands of applicants take the Biology Multiple Choice Test (MCT) and the outcome of this testing defines entry to tertiary education and career opportunities in medicine, agriculture, environmental sciences, and other professions. Sometimes, a low examinee would guess correctly on a challenging dichotomous item. Yu (2013) states that guessing is the likelihood that an examinee with very low ability can be able to guess the correct response to an item and therefore has a greater-than-zero probability of answering correctly. It is also known as pseudo-chance parameter and has a lower asymptote value. The item guessing parameter is the lowest value that an ICC curve attains.

From an achievement testing perspective, guessing can be conceptualized as when an individual does not definitively know the answer to a question, however attempts to answer the question anyway. There are likely many aspects that factor into the ability of an individual to arrive at the correct answer through guessing. The first and most straightforward would be through random guessing. This would be an act where the individual is unable to rule out any options and simply picks an answer at random. The chances that an individual will have the tendency of random guessing in a standardized achievement test would likely occur when an individual does not have the ability to understand the question nor the answer. The Three-Parameter Logistic (3PL) IRT model is especially well-adapted to this task, because it directly models a pseudo-guessing parameter (c-parameter), also known as the lower asymptote - the probability that an examinee with very low ability will respond correctly to an item.

Research Questions

The study was guided by the following research questions:

i. What are the guessing parameter estimates of the 2019 NABTCE Biology MCT items?

ii. What are the guessing parameter estimates of the 2020 NABTCE Biology MCT items?

iii. What are the guessing parameter estimates of the 2021 NABTCE Biology MCT items?

iv. Is there a significant difference in guessing parameter estimates across the 2019, 2020, and 2021 NABTCE Biology MCT items?

Hypothesis: There is no significant difference in the guessing parameter indices of the Biology Multiple choice items across May/June 2019, 2020 and 2021 NABTCE Biology multiple choice test items.

Literature Review

In the context of Item Response Theory models, the likelihood of providing a certain response to an item is contingent upon one or more latent variables as well as the parameters associated with said items. The primary objective of Item Response Theory analysis often involves examining the characteristics of individual test items and assessing the latent variables associated with each test taker. In situations involving binary elements, such as true/false, yes/no, correct/incorrect, and agree/disagree, the act of making educated conjectures is an inherent component of the testing environment. The technique involves students with limited understanding attempting to select the proper answer. The act of making educated guesses in an objective examination serves as an illustration of the need of including this behavior into the modelling process for examinees with lower levels of competence.

Students that possess limited skill levels have a non-negligible likelihood of correctly answering even the most difficult questions on multiple-choice tests, sometimes resorting to guessing as their preferred method of response. According to Chiu and Camilli (2012), the use of number-correct scores in research may result in statistical bias due to the introduction of test score unreliability caused by guessing. This implies that it is necessary to thoroughly reassess and thereafter evaluate or eliminate any items that the test takers are likely to guess correctly. From a purely psychometric standpoint, it can be seen that examinees with lesser cognitive capacities who manage to provide correct answers to difficult problems are more likely to have relied on guessing, as opposed to examinees with higher cognitive ability.

The Three-Parameter Logistic Model provides an estimation of the likelihood that an individual, with a certain level of skill, would answer an item correctly, taking into account the item's difficulty index, discriminating index, and guessing index. The three parameters being used for these models are the „b‟ „a‟ and „c‟ parameters which are the difficulty, discrimination and guessing parameters. The three-parameter logistic model (3PL) was proposed by Lord in 1980 and developed in educational testing to extend the application of item response theory to multiple choice items that may elicit guessing.

The underlying assumption of the model is that the inclusion of three factors, namely difficulty, discrimination, and guessing, is essential for accurately estimating the link between the likelihood of a right response to an item and the degree of the trait being assessed in the examinee. The act of guessing is providing a response or forming an evaluation on a matter without possessing complete certainty of all pertinent information. The utilization of guessing is a commonly employed test-taking approach employed by those who are undertaking a multiple choice examination. This approach offers the potential for accurate item responses, especially in cases when the examinee possesses limited understanding of the topic area. The impact of fortunate predictions on performance may be observed, as well as the potential decrease in performance for highly capable examinees due to negligence.

Theoretical Framework

Item Response Theory and the 3PL Model

The item Response Theory (IRT) is a collection of mathematical models that can be used to explain the interaction between the latent ability of an examinee and the likelihood of a correct item response. The Three-Parameter Logistic (3PL) model (Birnbaum, 1968; Lord, 1980) is expressed as:

$$P(X = 1 \mid \theta) = c + (1 - c) \times [e\text{^}(Da(\theta - b)) / (1 + e\text{^}(Da(\theta - b)))]$$

where: a = discrimination parameter; b = difficulty parameter; c = pseudo-guessing parameter (lower asymptote); D = 1.702 (scaling constant); θ = examinee ability. The c-parameter is the focus of this study — it represents the minimum probability of a correct response regardless of ability. For a four-option MCT, a purely random guess has a one-in-four (0.25) probability of success. Thus, c-values substantially exceeding 0.25 signal that an item is vulnerable to guessing beyond chance expectation.

On most assessments used, there are usually four to five options to select from so the probability of choosing a correct response to an item by guessing is 20 or 25 %. For example, an examinee who randomly selects responses to items that have four response choices can answer these items correctly about 1 out of 4 times, meaning that the probability of guessing correctly is about 0.25. Omorogiuwa (2009) states that any item whose guessing parameter is more than 0.20 is a bad item. For c-value, it should be between 0.00 to 0.20 for test with five distracters, test items with c-values greater than 0.20 was considered as an item with a high probability of guessing the answer correctly and such test items would be classified as not good test items (Adedoyin & Mokobi, 2013). Additionally, items with c-values of at least 0.30 are considered unsatisfactory. The c values should be 0.2 or below according to Warm 1978 in (Obinne, 2012). According to Swist (2015), the purpose of the model was to accurately measure the performance of examinees with poor ability who were able to answer difficult items correctly by guessing. The act of guessing introduces a form of unreliability in test results. This distinction is important as it can lead to statistical bias when analyzing data using number-correct scores (Chiu & Camilli, 2012).

The act of guessing poses a significant challenge when attempting to accurately assess the approximate proficiency level of a test taker. Taking into consideration the lower asymptote serves to address the issue of guessing, however, it is crucial to additionally consider the variability among individuals in terms of the likelihood that individuals with higher abilities may incorrectly respond to easy items due to factors such as carelessness, attention difficulties, socially desirable responding, distractions, or other influences like a lack of motivation to engage with a task that is deemed easy (Liao *et al.*, 2012).

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopted a survey research design using a large sample of student responses from the entire population of students who sat for the NABTCE Biology multiple choice test items that were administered in 2019, 220 and 2021 across Nigeria.

Population and Sampling

The target population comprised all candidates who sat the NABTCE Biology MCT in the three study years: 29,254 in 2019; 31,411 in 2020; and 19,144 in 2021; a total population of 79,809 candidates. A multistage probability sampling technique was employed. At the first stage, Nigeria's six geopolitical zones (North-Central, North-East, North-West, South-East, South-South, South-West) served as primary sampling units. At subsequent stages, states, candidate scripts were randomly selected. The final sample comprised 24,707 candidates (approximately 31% of the population), a size considered adequate for stable 3PL IRT parameter estimation (Embretson & Reise, 2000).

Instrument and Data Analysis

The tool was the NABTCE Biology, a 50-item, multiple choice test presented under standard conditions by NABTEB. Before IRT calibration, the unidimensionality assumption was evaluated by Principal Components Analysis (PCA) of the residuals that verified dimensionality. Calibration of data was further carried out through Winsteps 3.75.0 software within the 3PL model. The model-data fit was tested with the help of MNSQ infit and outfit statistics (acceptable range: 0.6-1.4). Each item was extracted as c-parameter and compared with the 0.25 threshold. A one-way ANOVA was used to compare significant differences between years in estimation of c-parameter. Internal consistency reliability: a = 0.644 (2019), a = 0.779 (2020) and a = 0.942 (2021).

Results

Guessing Parameter Estimates: 2019 NABTCE Biology MCT

Table 1 presents a summary of the guessing parameter (c-parameter) distribution for the 2019 NABTCE Biology MCT items.

Table 1

Summary of Guessing Parameter Estimates for 2019 NABTCE Biology MCT Items (N = 50)

Category	No. of Items	Percentage (%)	c-Value Range	Status
Acceptable (c ≤ 0.25)	49	98%	0.04 – 0.25	Satisfactory
Prone to Guessing (c > 0.25)	1	2%	0.27	Flagged
Total	50	100%	0.04 – 0.27	—

Note. c ≤ 0.25 is the acceptable threshold for four-option MCT items. Items exceeding this threshold are flagged.

As shown in Table 1, 49 of 50 items (98%) in the 2019 NABTCE Biology MCT recorded c-parameter estimates within the acceptable range. The c-values ranged from 0.04 to 0.27, suggesting that the vast majority of items required genuine ability rather than chance for correct responses.

Guessing Parameter Estimates: 2020 NABTCE Biology MCT

Table 2 presents the guessing parameter distribution for the 2020 NABTCE Biology MCT items.

Table 2

Summary of Guessing Parameter Estimates for 2020 NABTCE Biology MCT Items (N = 50)

Category	No. of Items	Percentage (%)	c-Value Range	Status
Acceptable (c ≤ 0.25)	47	94%	0.03 – 0.25	Satisfactory
Prone to Guessing (c > 0.25)	3	6%	0.27 – 0.39 (Items 12, 25, 47)	Flagged
Total	50	100%	0.03 – 0.39	—

The 2020 administration exhibited slightly higher guessing susceptibility relative to 2019.

Guessing Parameter Estimates: 2021 NABTCE Biology MCT

Table 3 presents the guessing parameter distribution for the 2021 NABTCE Biology MCT items.

Table 3

Summary of Guessing Parameter Estimates for 2021 NABTCE Biology MCT Items (N = 50)

Category	No. of Items	Percentage (%)	c-Value Range	Status
Acceptable ($c \leq 0.25$)	50	100%	0.05 – 0.23	Satisfactory
Prone to Guessing ($c > 0.25$)	0	0%	N/A	None Flagged
Total	50	100%	0.05 – 0.23	—

Note. The 2021 administration achieved a perfect record: all 50 items fell within the acceptable guessing threshold, with a maximum c-value of 0.23.

The 2021 NABTCE Biology MCT achieved a remarkable outcome: all 50 items recorded c-parameter estimates below the 0.25 threshold, with values ranging from 0.05 to 0.23.

Cross-Year Comparison and ANOVA Results

Table 4 provides a comparative overview of guessing performance across the three years, and Table 5 presents the ANOVA results.

Table 4

Cross-Year Summary of Guessing Parameter Estimates (2019–2021 NABTCE Biology MCT)

Year	Items Acceptable	Items Flagged	Max c-Value	Flagged Items
2019	49 (98%)	1 (2%)	0.27	Item 18
2020	47 (94%)	3 (6%)	0.39	Items 12, 25, 47
2021	50 (100%)	0 (0%)	0.23	None
Combined	146 (97.3%)	4 (2.7%)	0.39 (2020)	4 items total

Note. Acceptable threshold: $c \leq 0.25$ for four-option MCT items.

Table 5

One-Way ANOVA: Guessing Parameter Estimates Across 2019, 2020, and 2021 NABTCE Biology MCT Items

Year		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
	Between Groups	10741.382	2	10.138	3.228	.004
	Within Groups	1298.798	147	33.636		
	Total	12040.180	149			

$\alpha = 0.05$

Table 9 shows that the F-value for 2019 is 3.228 and p-value is 0.004. Hypothesis testing at 0.05 level of significance, the p-value is less than the alpha level of 0.05. Consequently, this shows that there is a significant difference in the guessing parameter estimates across the three years 2019, 2020 and 2021 NABTCE Biology multiple choice test items. Therefore, the null hypothesis that there is no significant difference in the guessing parameter estimates across the three years is rejected. Conclusively, there is a significant difference in the guessing parameter estimates across the three years.

Discussion

The NABTCE Biology MCT can be thus described as psychometrically sound as far as the resistance is concerned in the aspect of guessing. Regarding the guessing parameter, the results indicated that 98%, 94%, and 100% of items fitted the acceptable range in 2019, 2020, and 2021, respectively. These findings are partially consistent with Obine (2012), who considered valid items to have guessing parameters not above 0.25. The 2021 test items, with lower asymptotes ranging from 0.00 to 0.23, were in agreement with Ainsworth (2015), who suggested that the guessing parameter should be within or roughly equal to the inverse of the number of options in multiple-choice questions.

The 2019 administration scored highly (98% acceptable), the 2020 administration recorded a slight drop (94%), and the 2021 administration scored a 100 percent. Such a non-linear trend, small decline and then large increase, could be due to inherent difference in quality writing of items or panel composition or the particular Biology content areas that were being stressed in any single year. This trend in terms of the general direction is positive and indicates that the item development processes in NABTEB are moving towards a positive direction.

The clear deviation of Item 12 in 2020 (c = 0.39) should be given special consideration. A c=0.39 means that even a purely random candidate, on average, stood a 39% chance of a correct answer, which is significantly higher than the 25 percent threshold of a four-choice question. Such guessing vulnerability is almost certainly indicative of item construction vulnerabilities; either a stem that gives unintended cues, distractors that are implausible or semantically open or a content domain that relies on everyday knowledge as opposed to specialised learning of Biology. The item must undergo complete professional scrutiny and, in case there are significant material weaknesses ascertained, be eliminated out of item banks.

The study also revealed a significant difference in the guessing parameter estimates across the three years, which is consistent with the findings of Leong et al. (2013), who found that guessing had a significant impact on their research results. The guessing parameter estimates were also found to be stable, which is supported by DeAyala (2009), who reported comparable and consistent item parameter indices across different item subsets using an item response theory approach.

Conclusion

These findings demonstrate that the psychometric integrity of NABTCE Biology MCT items with respect to guessing susceptibility is not uniform across years and warrants systematic annual monitoring. These results have significant consequences in regard to the integrity of the Biology education certification in Nigeria, especially in relations to the role of NABTCE results in determining access to tertiary education in health sciences, agriculture, and environmental management where no genuine conceptual knowledge of Biology is to be underestimated.

Recommendations

Prerequisite IRT calibration prior to administration of the instrument.

- Annually NABTEB needs to identify a representative sample of schools (stratified by geopolitical zones) as field test schools.
- Software can be used, for example, Winsteps, jMetrik (free) or BILOG-MG; NABTEB can provide assistance to universities in calibration if there is no capacity in-house.

Training on capacity building for item writers and review panels.

- NABTEB should prepare a comprehensive Item Writing Training Manual and make a point of the distractors plausibility, item stem construction, interpretation of IRT parameters like c-parameter.
- Short intensive workshops (2-3 days) may be conducted in collaboration with the department of measurement and evaluation of the University for expertise.
- It should be required that item writers be certified after training to participate in item development panels.
- As well as being mandatory, refresher training should also be institutionalised and not be a one-off activity.

Longitudinal psychometric monitoring programme.

- It is valuable to have your study's results as a baseline. This (or an equivalent peer reviewed study) should be incorporated formally as Year Zero of the monitoring programme by NABTEB.
- Calibration of the instruments should be done every year internally and be communicated to the Federal Ministry of Education and the academic community.
- Anonymised item statistics published on an open-access basis would promote academic research

and accountability without revealing the content of items.

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A Phenomenological Examination of Children's Experience of Cartoons

Abstract

Long before they develop the vocabulary to explain what they feel, children are already living inside the cartoon world laughing, fearing, hoping, and wondering alongside characters that exist nowhere except in color and sound. Despite how central cartoons are to contemporary childhood, scholarly attention has rarely paused to ask what children themselves experience when they watch them. This is the gap the present study sets out to address through phenomenology particularly the tradition inaugurated by Edmund Husserl and developed by thinkers such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Max van Manen. This is with regards to how children perceive animated characters, engage their imaginations, construct meaning, and how the social and cultural worlds they inhabit shape what cartoons mean for them. The problem this study responded to is both philosophical and practical particularly how cartoons tends toward behavioral, cognitive, or media-effects frameworks of children. This study argued that cartoons are not merely entertainment or pedagogical tools but are, for children, genuine phenomenological encounters with imaginative worlds that carry real existential and cultural weight.

Keywords: Phenomenology, Lived Experience, Childhood, Cartoons, Meaning-Making.

Ikemesit John Nkanta
Department of Philosophy,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Uyo.
Phone: +2348089357010
ORCID: 0009-0002-0624-1503

Corresponding Author's Email:
ikemesitjnkanta@uniuyo.edu.ng

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Introduction

Cartoons have been part of children's daily lives for several decades, and their influence on how children think, feel, and make sense of the world around them is difficult to ignore. From early Saturday morning television broadcasts to the on-demand streaming platforms that now dominate children's media consumption, animated content has consistently occupied a central place in childhood. Despite these, all the attention that researchers have given to what cartoons do to children, whether they make them aggressive, whether they teach them letters and numbers, or whether they promote certain values and identities, remains a far less examined question. What do children actually experience when they watch cartoons? This question is not about effects in the behavioral sense. It is about the inner life of the child, the felt quality of engagement with animated characters, narrative worlds, and imaginative situations that cartoons routinely open up.

This is precisely the kind of question that phenomenology is built to address as a philosophical tradition concerned primarily with the structure of conscious experience. Phenomenology asks not what causes a given response but what it is like to undergo a particular experience from the inside. Max van Manen (9), one of the most influential voices in phenomenological research in human science and education, describes phenomenology as a method that "aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences". Applied to children and cartoons, this means asking what cartoon-watching genuinely feels like from a child's point of view, how children perceive and emotionally invest in animated characters, and what meanings they carry away from those encounters into their broader lives.

The problem this study responds to is a noticeable gap in the existing literature as most studies of children and media tend to rely on behavioral observation, content analysis, or experimental design. Valkenburg and Peter (222) have observed that media effects research has long operated within frameworks that treat audiences as largely passive recipients of media influence, with little room for the active, meaning-making engagement that actually characterizes how children relate to media content. This narrow understanding, however useful for certain purposes, leaves the lived and experiential dimension of children's cartoon engagement almost entirely unexplored. What a child feels, imagines, and constructs during and after a cartoon simply does not appear in these frameworks.

This study examines how children perceive animated worlds, how imagination and fantasy operate within those encounters, and how social and cultural forces shape what cartoons ultimately come to mean for children. The aim is not to replace existing approaches but to supplement them with a dimension that only phenomenological inquiry can adequately recover, namely, the first-person, lived character of childhood cartoon experience.

What is Phenomenology?

Phenomenology is a philosophical method that takes seriously the question of how things appear to conscious experience. Rather than asking what an object is in some abstract or purely scientific sense, phenomenology asks how that object is encountered, felt, and lived by a conscious subject. This distinction matters for any study concerned with children and cartoons, because it redirects attention from the cartoon as a media product to the cartoon as something a child actually inhabits in experience. The tradition begins with Edmund Husserl, whose concept of intentionality, which is the idea that all consciousness is always directed toward something, forms the philosophical bedrock of the approach. For Husserl (36), “experience is never a blank reception of external stimuli but is always shaped by the particular way consciousness reaches out toward its object”. What this means practically is that when a child watches a cartoon, the experience is not a passive intake of images but an active, intentional engagement in which the child is already bringing expectations, emotions, and interpretive tendencies to what they see.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty (147) extended this framework by insisting that consciousness is not disembodied but is always rooted in a living, sensing body. For him, perception is not something the mind does in isolation from the body. It is something the whole embodied person does. Merleau-Ponty wrote that "the body is our general medium for having a world", and this idea is particularly suggestive when applied to children, whose engagement with animated images is often physical, immediate, and visceral. Dan Zahavi (5), clarified that what makes phenomenology indispensable is its insistence on the first-person perspective as a legitimate and irreducible domain of inquiry. This is what distinguishes phenomenological inquiry from most existing media research.

Experience

In ordinary usage, experience tends to mean something like a history of exposure to events. In phenomenological terms, however, experience refers to something more intimate and more active. It is not simply what happens to a person but what a person lives through and makes sense of from the inside. This distinction is especially important when studying children, because children tend to inhabit their experiences with a kind of fullness and immediacy that adults have often lost. The child does not merely observe a cartoon; but in a meaningful sense, present within it.

Childhood

Childhood is best understood not as a preparatory phase before real human life begins but as a distinctive mode of being with its own logic, its own perceptual style, and its own relationship to the world. Gareth Matthews (18) argues against the tendency in both philosophy and developmental psychology to treat childhood as a deficit state, a condition of incompleteness awaiting adult rationality. For Matthews, "children engage in genuine philosophical wondering and possess a quality of openness to experience that deserves serious intellectual attention". William Corsaro (4) adds a sociological dimension to this, arguing that children are "active, creative social agents who produce their own unique children's cultures while simultaneously contributing to the production of adult society". These perspectives establish childhood as a form of life worth examining on its own terms, rather than as a stage to be explained away by developmental milestones.

Cartoons

Cartoons are animated visual texts that exaggerate, simplify, and reimagine the world through color, movement, and narrative. What makes them phenomenologically interesting is precisely their departure from realism. By stretching physical laws, giving inanimate objects personalities, and resolving moral conflicts within minutes, cartoons construct imaginative worlds that children find more emotionally accessible

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than many forms of realistic representation. Paul Wells (10) describes animation as a medium that operates through "the manipulation of movement, form and narrative in ways that exceed the conventions of live-action cinema", and it is this capacity for excess, for impossible things happening with complete emotional conviction, that gives cartoons their distinctive hold on the child's imagination. Cartoons are not simply entertainment but a particular kind of world children can enter, feel, and think inside.

Children's Perception of Cartoons

There is something about animation that speaks directly to the way children already perceive the world. Long before a child is taught to distinguish between what is real and what is imaginary, they are already living in a perceptual world that is rich with feeling, movement, and responsiveness. Animated images, with their bright colors, exaggerated expressions, and fast motion, do not feel strange to this world. They feel, in many ways, like a natural extension of it. This points to a genuine structural compatibility between the animated image and the child's mode of perception, one that helps explain why children engage with cartoons with such ease and emotional investment.

Writing on children's emotional responses to media characters, it is noted that young children tend to respond to animated figures with the same emotional registers they apply to real people, attributing intentions, feelings, and moral qualities to characters based on expressive visual cues rather than narrative context alone (Bosacki and Moore 301). This finding aligns closely with what phenomenology would predict because if perception is always already intentional and emotionally toned, as Husserl and Merleau-Ponty both argued, then it follows that a child watching a cartoon does not first see shapes and colors and then infer a character. The character is perceived directly, as a presence with a felt quality, a personality, and a kind of emotional weight.

The way children identify with cartoon characters goes deeper than simple preference. When a child watches a cartoon protagonist face danger or embarrassment, the child does not merely observe from a safe emotional distance. There is a genuine felt participation in the character's situation, something closer to what phenomenologists call empathic projection, where the self imaginatively inhabits another's experience. A scholar has argued that children's engagement with television characters involves active emotional and cognitive work, and that children as young as three are capable of distinguishing between their own emotional states and those of a character while still being genuinely moved by what the character undergoes (Davies 67). This simultaneity, knowing it is not real and yet feeling it fully, is one of the most fascinating phenomenological features of childhood cartoon experience.

Identification is also shaped by resemblance, not just physical resemblance but resemblance of situation and feeling. A child who feels misunderstood at home may not consciously connect that feeling to a cartoon character who is overlooked by peers, though the emotional resonance of that character's experience can be deeply felt. Sandra Calvert (130) notes that children form strong parasocial relationships with media characters, relationships that carry genuine psychological and emotional significance even in the absence of real interaction. What this suggests, phenomenologically, is that the cartoon character becomes a kind of experiential companion through whom the child explores emotional possibilities that their own immediate life may not yet have offered them.

Adults who enter a fictional world must usually make a deliberate cognitive effort to set aside what they know to be real. For children, this suspension of disbelief is far less effortful and far more complete. It is less a choice than a natural disposition, a feature of what van Manen calls the child's particular "lifeworld," the pre-reflective background of assumptions, habits, and orientations through which all experience is structured (van Manen 11). Children do not decide to believe in a cartoon world but simply find themselves in it, absorbed and present in a way that most adults can only partially recover.

This quality of absorption has important implications meaning that what children encounter in cartoons is not held at arm's length as fiction but is, during the encounter itself, lived with something approaching the seriousness of reality. Research on children's emotional responses to media found that children's fear responses to animated content are physiologically and psychologically real, producing stress responses that persist well beyond the viewing experience itself (Cantor 292). The cartoon world, in other words, is not a lesser world for the child. It is, during the time of engagement, a fully inhabited one, and what happens in it carries genuine experiential weight.

Imagination, Fantasy, and Meaning-Making in Cartoons

If perception is the entry point into the cartoon world, imagination is what keeps the child there. The moment a child sits before an animated screen, something more than visual processing begins to happen. The child starts filling in gaps, anticipating what a character might do next, feeling the pull of a narrative whose resolution is not yet known, and investing emotionally in outcomes that, strictly speaking, do not exist. This imaginative activity is not secondary to the cartoon experience; but constitutive of it. Without it, cartoons would be nothing more than moving images.

For Sartre, the imagining consciousness does not simply reproduce a weakened version of perception. It takes a fundamentally different orientation toward its object, one in which the object is posited as absent, as beyond the immediate perceptual field, and yet held present through an act of consciousness (Sartre 16). When a child imagines alongside a cartoon narrative, following a character into danger or hoping for a happy resolution, they are performing exactly this kind of act, holding something emotionally real while knowing, at some level, that it is not perceptually there. This is a sophisticated cognitive and emotional achievement, and the fact that children do it so naturally and so early in life says something important about the imaginative richness of childhood.

Cartoon narratives are particularly well suited to this kind of imaginative engagement because they operate through fantasy, that is, through deliberate departures from the constraints of ordinary reality. Kieran Egan (27) argues that fantasy is not a retreat from understanding but is one of the primary cognitive tools through which children make sense of abstract concepts, emotional realities, and moral questions. A cartoon in which a small, weak character repeatedly outsmarts a large, powerful one is not simply entertaining but giving the child imaginative access to ideas about power, fairness, and resilience in a form that is emotionally graspable.

Meaning-making, in this context, is not a passive reception of intended messages as children do not simply absorb what a cartoon's creators want them to learn. They bring their own experiences, fears, desires, and social knowledge to the viewing encounter and construct meanings that are often personal and idiosyncratic. David Buckingham (6), insists that children are "active and critical users of media, capable of making their own meanings and pleasures". This active dimension of cartoon engagement is frequently underestimated by adults who assume that children simply receive what is on screen.

What phenomenology adds to Buckingham's point is a deeper account of how this meaning-making actually feels from the inside. It is lived through emotion, through bodily response, through the imaginative co-authorship of narrative. Judy DeLoache and Gabrielle Gottlieb (3), examining the ways young children engage with symbolic and narrative media, found that children do not simply receive the surface content of what they watch but actively interpret character motivations and story situations through the emotional and experiential knowledge they already carry with them. The child is a participant, and the meaning that emerges from cartoon experience is always, in part, a creation of the child's own imaginative and emotional life.

Social and Cultural Influences in Children's Cartoon Experiences

The child who watches a cartoon is never simply an isolated consciousness encountering an animated world. That child carries into the viewing experience an entire social and cultural history bordering on a set of values, relationships, expectations, and learned ways of seeing that have been shaped by family, community, language, and broader cultural environment. This is one of the points where phenomenology must be pushed beyond its more individualistic tendencies, because experience, however personal is always social. The child does not arrive at a cartoon as a blank slate but as a social being, and the experience they have is filtered through that social formation in ways that are often invisible to the child themselves.

A scholar argues that human experience is always structured by what he called the "lifeworld," which is a pre-given social and cultural horizon that determines in advance what can be perceived, valued, and understood (Schutz 72). For children, this lifeworld is largely constructed by the family and immediate community, and it operates quietly beneath the surface of every media encounter. A child raised in a community that values collective identity and communal responsibility will not experience a cartoon that celebrates individual heroism in the same way as a child raised in a more individualistic cultural setting. The images on screen may be identical, but the experiences they generate are shaped by entirely different social foundations.

Gender is one of the most visible ways in which this social shaping operates. This is because cartoons have historically encoded strong gender norms, assigning distinct personality traits, roles, and narrative functions to male and female characters, and children pick up on these encodings with remarkable sensitivity. Rebecca Hains (43), while examining the cultural politics of girl-targeted animated programming, found that even cartoons ostensibly designed to empower girls frequently reinforce conventional femininity through character design, narrative resolution, and the values that female protagonists are shown to embody. What matters phenomenologically is not just that these representations exist but that children live through them, absorbing gender expectations not as abstract ideological messages but as felt qualities of characters they admire, imitate, and identify with.

The context in which a child watches a cartoon, whether alone, alongside siblings, or in the company of parents who comment, explain, or express disapproval, significantly alters the nature of the experience itself. Amy Nathanson's (123) shows that active parental commentary during viewing, whether critical or instructive, changes how children process and evaluate media content, sometimes deepening engagement and sometimes creating emotional distance from characters and narratives that the child might otherwise have embraced unreservedly. Experience, in this sense, is not only what happens between the child and the screen but what also happens in the social space around that encounter.

Cultural representation, or its absence, shapes cartoon experience in ways that are precisely consequential for children from minority or non-Western backgrounds. When a child consistently encounters cartoon worlds populated by characters who do not look like them, speak like them, or live in worlds that resemble their own, the effect is not neutral. Srividya Ramasubramanian (341) argues that the underrepresentation and misrepresentation of minority groups in children's media contributes to what she calls "media-based stereotype threat," a condition in which repeated exposure to distorted or absent representations quietly erodes a child's sense of belonging and self-worth. Lived from the inside, this is not an abstract sociological problem but an experience of estrangement and a feeling that the imaginative worlds one is invited to inhabit were not really built with you in mind.

What all of this points to is that cartoon experience is never purely private but mediated by the social and cultural world the child inhabits, and a genuinely phenomenological account of that experience must be willing to trace those variations carefully. To this end, the meanings children make from cartoons and the characters they love and fear and emulate couple with the emotional textures of their animated encounters, are shaped not only by what is on screen but by who the child has been made to be by the world around them.

Evaluation

Having examined the phenomenological structure of children's cartoon experience across perception, imagination, meaning-making, and social and cultural mediation, it becomes necessary to assess how well this framework actually holds up. The phenomenological approach brings genuine strengths to the study of children and cartoons, but also carries limitations that an honest evaluation cannot afford to ignore.

The most significant strength of phenomenology as applied here is precisely what makes it different from most existing research and it is the insistence on taking the child's inner life seriously as a subject of inquiry in its own right.

Behavioral and cognitive frameworks have produced important findings about how children respond to animated media, but they tend to study the child from the outside, measuring observable outcomes rather than attending to the experience itself. Thomas Schwandt has noted that interpretive and phenomenological approaches to research are valuable precisely because they "seek to understand the complex world of lived experience from the point of view of those who live it" (Schwandt 193). In a field dominated by effect-oriented research, this orientation is not merely refreshing. It is necessary, because the dimensions of experience that phenomenology illuminates simply cannot be reached by other means.

A second strength lies in the framework's capacity to hold together dimensions of cartoon experience that other approaches tend to separate. Perception, imagination, emotion, cultural identity, and social context are not treated here as distinct variables to be isolated and measured. They are understood as aspects of a single, unified experience that only makes sense when considered together. This integrative quality gives phenomenological analysis a certain richness and authenticity that more fragmented methodological approaches tend to lack.

That said, the phenomenological examination of childhood experience faces a methodological challenge that must be acknowledged directly. Children, particularly young children, do not always possess the language or the reflective capacity to articulate what they experience. The gap between what a child lives through and what a child can report is real, and it means that any phenomenological account of childhood experience carries an irreducible element of interpretive reconstruction.

William Corsaro, reflecting on the methodological difficulties inherent in studying children's social and experiential worlds, notes that adult researchers inevitably bring their own interpretive frameworks to the study of childhood, and that even careful ethnographic and qualitative methods carry the risk of mapping adult conceptual categories onto experiences that children themselves organise quite differently (Corsaro 31). This is a legitimate concern, and it places an obligation on researchers to remain epistemically humble and treat their accounts as approximations rather than definitive transcriptions of the child's inner world.

Phenomenological inquiry, by its very nature, attends to the particular and the situated. The experiences examined in this paper are not uniform across all children. They are shaped by gender, culture, family context, and representational politics, and what counts as a typical cartoon experience for one child may be quite foreign to another. Kieran Egan and Gillian Judson argues that any educational or philosophical account of childhood that fails to account for cultural and individual variation risks producing a portrait of the child that is, in effect, a portrait of a particular kind of child, usually the Western, middle-class child who has historically dominated the research literature (Egan and Judson 54). This study has attempted to resist that tendency, particularly in its treatment of cultural representation, but the limitation remains one that future phenomenological research in this area must address more systematically.

Despite these limitations, the phenomenological framework remains the most adequate available approach for the question this study set out to answer. No other method is as well positioned to recover the lived, felt, and meaning-laden character of children's cartoon experience.

Conclusion

This study argues that children's experience of cartoons is a genuinely phenomenological event, one that deserves to be examined not through the lens of behavioral effects or cognitive outcomes alone but through careful attention to what that experience is actually like from the inside. Beginning with the child's perceptual engagement with animated images, moving through the imaginative and meaning-making processes that cartoon narratives activate, and then situating all of this within the social and cultural worlds that children inhabit, the study has tried to build a picture of cartoon experience that is as honest as the available frameworks allow.

What emerges from this examination is a portrait of the child as an active, emotionally invested, and culturally situated participant in the cartoon world, not a passive receiver of media content but someone who brings imagination, feeling, and personal history to every viewing encounter. This is not a minor correction to existing research but a fundamental reorientation, one that places the child's subjectivity at the center of inquiry rather than at its margins.

Dafna Lemish, corroborate that children across different social and cultural settings consistently demonstrate an active orientation toward media, constructing meanings that are "anchored in their own life experiences, social relationships, and cultural contexts" (Lemish 47). This study treats the child not as an object of media influence but as a subject of media experience. The implications of this reorientation extend beyond the academic with parents, educators, media producers, and policymakers who take children's cartoon experience seriously. They will ask not only what cartoons teach but what children feel, imagine, and become through their engagement with animated worlds. They will recognize that the hours a child spends with a cartoon are not empty hours but hours in which identity is being quietly shaped, emotional possibilities are being explored, and a relationship with the broader cultural world is being formed.

There remains, of course, much that this paper has not been able to do. A fully adequate phenomenological account of children's cartoon experience would need to draw on empirical engagement with children themselves, through interviews, observations, and narrative methods that allow children's own voices to enter the analysis just as it has been shown that young children are far more capable of articulating the textures of their experience than adult-centered research traditions have typically assumed (Clark and Moss 6).

What this study has established, at the very least, is that the question of what children experience when they watch cartoons is a serious philosophical question, one that opens onto deeper questions about consciousness, imagination, identity, and the relationship between culture and inner life. Cartoons have always been part of childhood, hence, it is time they became a more serious part of how childhood is studied from a philosophical and phenomenological point of view for a fuller understanding of the intersection and interconnection.

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