

Cyber-Cultism: A Paradigm Shift from a Physical Warfare to an Economic Warfare.

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ABSTRACT

The study aims at examining cyber-cultism in Adekunle Ajasin University, Ondo State in a sample of 20 students at Adekunle Ajasin University Ondo State, Nigeria who were selected with the use of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. To achieve the study objectives, qualitative methods of data collection and analysis were employed alongside general strain theory. The result of the study showed that respondents perceived internet fraud as an alternative to socially approved means of survival. Findings also show the high pecuniary gains that come from the fraudulent act have fostered the inter-cult exchange of ideas on technicalities necessary to successfully defraud internet victims. There is a need for effective reorientation, sensitization, and strict enforcement of policies that could help to tackle the menace by implementing laws to stem cultism and cybercrime by both the government and school authorities.

Keywords: Cultism, Cult groups, Cybercrime, Internet

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Over the years, the emerging opportunities on the internet and online communication ushered in a criminal pattern among youths in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The existence of secret cults all over the world is not a recent phenomenon. There is good reason to believe that many of the early secret cults in the world were originally founded as benevolent associations for laudable and objectionable purposes. Chesveaux (1971) claims that in China secret societies have always played an extremely important part in the life of the Chinese especially politics, religion, commerce, trade unions and the criminal underworld. In Nigeria, especially among the Yoruba-speaking groups there existed, according to Fadipe (1970), the Ogboni secret society was associated with the making of legislation and administration.

However, what is known as secret cults in tertiary institutions started in 1952 when Nigerian-born Nobel Laureate, Prof. Wole Soyinka, then a student of University College, Ibadan, teamed up with six other students to form what they called Pyrates Confraternity also known as National Association of Sea Dogs (NAS) which soon grew in membership covering other tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The original objectives of the confraternity as stated by the founders were to promote polite behaviour, enhance cultural nationality, fight tribalism, shake off colonial mentality and establish an identity of independence for its members (Akinuli 1990). From the objectives, it could be seen that the creation of the Pyrates Confraternity was not destructive and was never intended to be a symbol of oppression and terrorism; rather it was to encourage and foster social reforms, political awareness, students' cohesion and the evolution of university culture.

Although, these ideas have now changed. The proliferation of secret cults in Nigerian institutions has marked the deviation of norms and values. They have wielded socio-political and economic powers, and arms and ammunition have invaded the campuses like a virus steadily devouring both the present and future generations of our youth (Ogunbameru, 1999). Secret cults in tertiary institutions now engage in crimes such as rape, murder, armed robbery, kidnapping etc.

Recently, activities of student cult members in Nigerian tertiary institutions have taken a new dimension. The rise of technology and online communication has not only produced a dramatic increase in the incidence of criminal activities but has also resulted in the emergence of what appears to be a new variety of criminal

activities. Internet fraud is one of the dominant forms of crime that is widely being perpetrated by tertiary institution students in Nigeria (Adeniran, 2008 Tade and Aliyu, 2011). Fraud is not a new phenomenon because it has always been around since human history. Its definition and outcomes on victims have not changed. With the use of the Internet for commercial purposes, the method of perpetration of fraudulent activities has evolved to include online capabilities. In a nutshell, Internet/online fraud is any type of fraud scheme that uses one or more components of the Internet to perpetuate a crime. (Ojedokun and Eraye, 2012.). Such means may include chat rooms message boards, or websites. Internet frauds among educated youths enjoy better planning, execution and organization (Tade and Aliyu, 2011).

A high level of internet impersonality allows for its deployment for whichever purpose by its users. According to Ojedokun and Eraye, (2012), the Internet remains a mechanism of dissemination of information, collaboration and interaction among individuals and computers without regard for geographical location. Dalal (2006) observes that technology is a double-edged sword, capable of destructive as well as constructive purposes. According to Jaishankar (2008, pg.295), "Traditional crime gangs are starting to use the internet not only for communication but also as a tool to commit crimes such as extortion, money laundering, intimidation, phishing, identity theft, hacking etc".

Thus, youths, especially undergraduates have embraced ICT inventions (Adeniran, 2008). In this sense, it is observable that cult members in tertiary institutions now have diverted attention from their initial focus on self-ego, respect and recognition to economic benefits. There now seems to be a paradigm shift from physical warfare to economic warfare. The old and rugged lifestyle is being replaced by a new wave of emerging crime which looks more lucrative, faster and convenient (Jaishankar, 2008).

The high rate of occurrence of cybercrime and cultism over the years is a crucial factor in explaining this shift. Studies on cybercrime have focused on undergraduates or youth as a whole. However, little attention has been given to the link between cybercrime and cultism among undergraduates in Nigeria. Hence, this study examined cyber-cultism: a paradigm shifts from physical warfare to economic warfare in Nigeria tertiary institutions a case study of Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State, Nigeria.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

General strain theory points to certain types of strain and conditions under which strain is most likely to lead to crime. He posited that failure to achieve money, status/respect and autonomy can lead to strain or stress. He also assumes that crime is a result of pressure by negative stimuli as a result of negative relationships. Negative stimuli could cause people to engage in criminal behavior as a way to escape or avoid the negative stimuli, terminate or seek revenge against negative stimuli. Agnew opined that this negative stimulus promotes the desire to correct a situation by innovating other means that may be used to ease the strain caused by the failure to achieve positively valued goals (Agnew, 1992). The theory has helped in explaining why self-control and social control fail and the reason for the high prevalence of criminal activity in our society.

As a viable theory of criminology, it is acknowledged that there are different perceptions of strain theories and it is believed that it best suits this study. However, all strain theories explain that people experience strain or stress, they become upset with the situation, and they sometimes innovate other means as a way of escaping stress. In the case of cyber-cultism, undergraduates engage in cyber-crime as a means of achieving the cultural goal of economic success since some sociodemographic factors have stopped them from achieving this goal through the cultural means acceptable by society.

Closely related to the desire for economic success is the desire for respect. People want to be positively regarded by others and they want to be treated honorably by others, which at a minimum involves being treated in a just or fair manner. While people have a general desire for status and respect is especially relevant to crime. There are different views about what it means to be a "man," although most such views emphasize traits like independence, dominance, toughness, and competitiveness. Many cultists experience difficulties in satisfying their desire to be viewed and treated as men, these people may attempt to accomplish respect through cyber-crime. They may attempt to coerce others into giving them the respect they believe they deserve as "real men" by adopting a tough response like cybercrime as an effort to establish a tough reputation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study was explorative and within the backdrop of our literature search and the objectives of the study, the design relied on a qualitative method of inquiry. This was necessary because the nature of the problem under investigation required a design that would give room for participation, which can only be provided by a qualitative research method.

Study Area

The study was conducted in Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba Akoko, Ondo State (AAUA). Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba Akoko, which was formerly Ondo State University, was established in 1999 and at present, AAUA has over 10,000 students with eight (8) faculties. The study area was chosen based on the high rate of cult activities in the school and its environs and also with a high record of cyber-crime offences.

Study Population

Students who admitted to belonging to secret fraternities and also engaged in cyber-crime in Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba Akoko, Ondo State constituted the population studied.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

The study employed a multi-stage sampling. According to Asika (2004), multi-stage sampling becomes desirable when sampling procedures are so complex that a single sampling technique can no longer be feasible. The multi-stage sampling involves the use of purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. Purposive sampling was used to determine the appropriateness and adequacy of the study sample and its characteristics. This view supports Nachmias and Nachimias (1996), arguing that purposive sampling techniques help researchers to make subjective judgments about samples that appear to be representative of the population. A snowballing sampling was employed to locate students suspected to be cult members who engaged in internet fraud also known as 'yahoo boys'. This is informed by the nature and the sensitivity attached to the study focus. However, the sample size for this study was proportionately distributed and a total of twenty (20) samples were drawn from the study area for the in-depth interview.

Sources and Methods of Data Collection

However, the study employed a qualitative method of data collection a survey method that involves in-depth interviews (IDI). The data for this study were collected through both primary and secondary sources. The primary data was collected with the use of survey and observation and secondary data was provided by the review of relevant literature from text journals, and newspaper reports.

For the in-depth interview, all sessions were held in the daytime and were recorded through the use of a tape recorder. Although, few of the participants disagreed with the use of tape recorders but allowed note taking. For the participants to be on the safer side, venues of the interviews were held at an agreed place chosen by them. Interviews were held at different places and each interview lasted for about forty minutes.

Research Instrument

The main instrument for data collection was the in-depth interview guide (IDI). This method of data collection was chosen to ensure the effective participation of the research subjects and also for flexibility in the data collection that gave room for probing of respondents because of the exploratory nature of the study. The IDI was personally conducted with student cult members who engaged in cyber-crime in the research university.

Method Of Data Analysis

The study employed qualitative analysis. To present and analyse data from interview data were transcribed,

translated, and thematically analysed based on the objectives of the study with the use of Atlas-ti version (7) qualitative data analysis tool. Content analysis was adopted for analyzing the data and similar thoughts expressed across the participating IDI were identified, coded and grouped to come up with major themes

Ethical Considerations

This study strictly adhered to the principles of voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. All information generated was treated with the utmost confidentiality and was used in such a way that no individual who participated in the study was linked with any information after the interview sections. Participants were informed verbally about the nature, the procedure and what the information that was given was used for. Caution was taken not to make the interview sections unnecessarily long to avoid discomfort to respondents. Finally, the respondents were duly informed that they had the right to withdraw at any point in the course of the research, and as such, the respondents were not forced to participate in the study against their own will. Their opinions were respected and adhered to when they felt their interests were at risk.

Problems Encountered

The study was limited to students who admitted to belong to secret fraternities. Due to the sensitive nature of the study and the hidden identity of the respondents was a major challenge. Even when the researcher eventually got to meet them with the help of some informants who had assured them the research was purely academic research and not security personnel, they still were uneasy in their attitude. After making appointment dates with some of the students, many failed to turn up thereby leading to another rescheduling and extending my days in the study area.

The researcher was thoroughly searched before every interview. In one of the encounters, a recorder was found with the researcher and the cult members feeling unsafe destroyed it immediately leading to the abrupt end of the interview. It took several days for another meeting to be arranged. The cost of buying drinks before an interview for some of the respondents was a serious challenge. Some of them were in a hurry to finish the interview. Lastly, the major limitation was the huge cost expended on entertainment.

RESULT

Factors Influencing involvement of Cult Members in Cybercrime.

The majority of the respondents mentioned peer pressure and oppression. Peer pressure is an influence on an individual, a peer group, or an observer that encourages others to change their attitudes, values or behaviours to conform to groups. Oppression on the other hand is the exercise of power in a burdensome, cruel or unjust manner by an individual or group of individuals. Cult members joined the cybercrime cliques because they faced the turmoil of financial crises having come from poor backgrounds, and also because they were being oppressed at the bar especially and other social joints.

A respondent stated thus:

“I am from a poor family. So, this is the major factor. Also, social oppression of these yahoo yahoo boys convinces me to join because these guys get respect from everyone, from girls, male friends, lecturers, even police”. (IDI/Male/Vikings/June/2024)

In line with this response, some of the respondents even gave scenarios of incidents of how other Yahoo guys socially oppress them.

A respondent said:

“For me, the major factor is oppression from fellow students who engage in cybercrime. For instance, you go to a bar or hotel to relax and you see how Yahoo guys spend money extravagantly, this might influence you. For example, before I started scamming business, I went to a bar one day to buy drinks, and to my amazement, the

waiter said he couldn't sell beer to me because the whole shop had been bought by some yahoo yahoo boys". **(IDI/Male/Eiye/August/2024)**

In the same vein, another respondent responded that:

"Gone are those days when becoming noticeable in our group is purely seniority and how spiritually fortified you are. These days it's all about how much you can bring to the table if not nobody will recognize you" **(IDI/Male/Mafia/July/2024)**

Another interviewee added

"To become number one, you need to know who is who in the state and the only way to do this is by rolling with the well-to-do in the society. Remembered when there was an issue between my fraternity and the Aiye last year. Our number one went to Osogbo to bring police officers to arrest the other group member. That day I promised myself that I would be rich in life. He was able to command such respect and authority because he has money to even buy authority to his side". **(IDI/Male/Buccaneer/July/2024)**

However, other key influential factors that lured cultists into Cybercrime are poverty, poor background and Self-dependency. Poverty is related to and associated with poor background. Poverty is a scarcity or lack of a certain amount of material possessions or money. Some of the respondents have faced challenges of abject or relative poverty, and these influenced them to join the clique of cyber criminals. Self-dependency on the other hand is the ability to take care of one's self financially and by other means. The celebration of wealth by Nigerians regardless of how it is made and the corruption in the society especially among public office holders a major factor in why cult members engage in cyber-crime

Extent at Which Cyber-Crime Has Reduced Violent Clashes and Cult Activities

According to a response from the suspected cult members interviewed, control measures put in place by the school government board are not as effective as how cybercrime has been among the cult members. When asked whether or not cybercrime has reduced cult activities and clashes among cult groups, it is discovered that attention has been shifted from showing ruggedness through physical means to win different beautiful ladies to their sides, getting high grades from lecturers, and getting famous in the school, to using money to get access to various "big girls" in the school campuses, getting high marks from lecturers, amongst others which are some of the aims of being in the cult groups. All these have been achieved through cybercrime indulgence by the cult group.

Thus, the majority of the respondents admitted cybercrime has reduced cult clashes and activities.

A respondent stated thus:

"What I have to say is Yahoo has done more positive in this country than negative. You can see that in the early 1990s and early 2000s, cultism in universities and even polytechnics in Nigeria was very rampant but the invention of this yahoo yahoo scam business has put people's lives back on track. Instead of engaging in crimes committed physically which has negative consequences such as death during the process of initiation and death caused by inter-cult conflict, they would rather invest such time to increase their computer skills which would fetch them money. It has even reduced other crimes in Nigeria like armed robbery, Kidnapping, assassination and so on". **(IDI/Male/Vikings/September/2024)**

Even if you are from a different fraternity, research has shown that cult members work together to make money together. This "special" group has an association, and they have meeting days and joints despite their cult differences, to exchange ideas on cybercrime. There has been a peace movement between and among these fraternities due to the invention of the cybercrime phenomenon. Also, it is noted that Cybercrime has not only reduced cult activities in higher institutions but also some other criminal offences such as kidnapping, armed robbery and others.

To buttress the response above, another respondent said:

“To an extent, I will say it has reduced cult clashes because yahoo yahoo has brought about unity among cult groups. For example, all the working boys in this school (Akungba) have an association and these boys are of different cult groups. We meet twice a year. What we do is that we assist one another in the job, exchange ideas, and discuss how our lives would be meaningful”. (IDI/Male/Klansmen/June/2024)

Some respondents have consented that some cults have reoriented their recruitment processes not to be based on only ruggedness but also include wealth and what they called “street orientation” which is the ability to do what it takes to make money.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Cybercrime and Cultism is a distinct area of study that is exploratory. The results gathered have convergence and divergence points with the reviewed literature and theory. To enrich theories and fill gaps in knowledge or reviewed literature, these points have been demonstrated under each section of data presentation and theoretical framework. These interconnections and interrelations between these three approaches have been able to produce a sound theoretical framework for the study of the urge to be a cultist has diverted to involvement in cybercrime as discussed under the theoretical framework. The discussion, expectedly, is presented in line with the objectives of the study.

The first objective was to examine various factors influencing the involvement of suspected cult members in cybercrime. In achieving this objective, findings reveal that social and economic factors are the general main factors influencing the cult member to engage in cybercrime. More specifically the factors are oppression, peer pressure, self-dependency, and frustration. According to Ehimen and Bola (2009), the internet has created geometric growth and accelerated windows of opportunities for businesses and the removal of economic barriers hitherto faced by nations of the world. Considering these limitless advantages of the internet, one can easily subscribe to the fact that it is an important tool for national development in a developing country like Nigeria. The social factor which was the prevailing factor can further be buttressed by Agnew’s general strain theory which can be applied to cyber-crimes. The main premise behind this theory is that youth engage in crime to correct their situation. Cybercrimes are increasing so quickly in society and how can individuals learn to become cybercriminals? There is a wide spectrum of the different kinds of offenders and motivations

The second objective was to examine the extent to which cybercrime has reduced cult activities and clashes among rival cult groups. From the findings gathered, all the respondents consented that cybercrime activities have reduced cult activities because there has been a shift from hooliganism by cultists to cybercrime. This is because the majority of those who join cultist cliques are there because of women, power tussles, getting rewarded by lecturers with high marks, hanging out with friends, and the quest for money. The findings further revealed that it has reduced inter-group clashes because the members of various groups even work together to achieve their goal in cybercrime. It is gathered that with the advent of cybercrime, attention has been shifted to it because according to these cultists, ladies are best won with money, not with hooliganism and gangsterism anymore. This is convergent to Ekerayanwu and Igbinoba (2007). as he identified some of the campus vices which include: Cultism; Scuffles; Rape; Hooliganism; Disrespect for constituted authorities and Examination malpractices and others. These cult members who do cybercrime now get more fame, get high marks from lecturers, and even money realized from cybercrime is used to gain a position within the cult group. In addition, the findings show that the addiction to cybercrime has made suspected cult members glued to their computers thereby making them spend more time surfing the internet and hunting for prey than attending cult meetings and also engaging in fights and other cult activities

SUMMARY

The Socio demographic data indicates that all participants are predominately male and they fall in the age bracket of 18-30. Their disciplines cut across different faculties in the institution. The study examines varying factors influencing the involvement of cult members in cyber-crime in Adekunle Ajasin University Akungba Akoko, Ondo State. On achieving this objective, findings reveal that social and economic factors are the general main factors influencing cult members to engage in cybercrime. More specifically the factors are poor family background, social oppression, peer pressure, self-dependency, poverty and frustration.

Also, the study also shows that cult members now see money has their primary target and these has brought about members of rival cult group to put heads together by exchanging ideas, skills and materials to make money which is a better alternative rather than engaging in clashes and other cult activities. It also reveals cyber-crime is time consuming such that cult members spend more time hunting for preys online and these has limited their contribution in clashes and other cult activities. Findings reveal that cyber-crime dividends have changed the orientation of cult members as the method appears to be less risky and physically strenuous compared to other crimes they engage in like stealing, armed robbery, assassination, kidnapping etc.

CONCLUSION

This study examines cyber-cultism in Adekunle Ajasin University, Akungba-Akoko, Ondo State. As stated earlier the findings of this study have a wider policy implication for cultism, cybercrime and undergraduates in Nigeria as a whole. However, there seems to be an increasing prevalence of cyber-cultism. This fact is influenced by economic factors and other latent factors. It should be noted that a complex issue like this that involves youths requires a general approach that will involve all stakeholders and not the government alone. Given the foregoing, it can be concluded within the strain theoretical framework that there is relatively corrective action that individual takes whenever they experience strain in society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. University management should provide an adequate security system on campus by establishing an “Anti-Cyber Crime Squad”, which will be charged with the responsibility of monitoring the internet activities operating on campus, to discourage students from using such facilities to perpetrate nefarious acts. Similarly, a strong alliance is equally advocated between university authorities and relevant security agencies, such as the Special Fraud Unit (SFU) and the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), to put in place a more effective measure to combat students’ involvement in cybercrime.
2. University authorities should imbibe the culture of organizing regular seminars and symposiums, which will serve as veritable platforms, where students can be counseled and sensitized on the ills and negative effects of their involvement in cybercrime. This will go a long way in bridging the gap that usually exists between the school management and their students and will further ensure value reorientation in the students.
3. The Nigerian government and corporate organizations should continuously render financial assistance to students by making scholarships and grants available to the brilliant ones among them. This gesture will go a long way in encouraging students to take their academics very seriously, and consequently, discourage them from getting involved in such deviant acts, like involvement in cyber-crime.

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