



## Digital Socialization and Youth Identity Formation: Towards Addressing Banditry and Kidnapping in Nigeria

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**Abstract.** This study examines the complex relationship between digital socialization and youth identity formation within the context of rising banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria. As young people increasingly rely on digital platforms for communication, learning, and self-expression, these spaces have become significant agents of social influence—sometimes reinforcing pro-social values, but also exposing youth to narratives that legitimize violence, criminality, and anti-state sentiments. Using a qualitative, interpretive approach, the study analyses how social media interactions, online communities, algorithmic content exposure, and virtual peer networks shape identity construction among Nigerian youth in high-risk environments. Findings highlight that weak digital literacy, online anonymity, economic marginalization, and the glamorization of criminal lifestyles contribute to identity shifts that may predispose vulnerable youth toward banditry and kidnapping. The study argues for a strategic national framework that integrates digital citizenship education, community-driven online counter-narratives, strengthened parental and institutional digital supervision, and socio-economic empowerment initiatives. By addressing how identity is negotiated and contested in digital spaces, the study provides insights into leveraging digital ecosystems for positive youth development, conflict prevention, and long-term national security in Nigeria.

**Keywords:** Digital socialization; Youth identity building; Banditry; Kidnapping; Online networks; Digital citizenship; Social media influence and Security.

### 1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of digital technologies has transformed the ways young people interact, learn, and develop their identities in contemporary societies. In Nigeria, widespread access to smartphones, social media platforms, and online communities has created new avenues for youth socialization beyond traditional family and community structures. This form of digital socialization significantly shapes young people's value orientation, behavioural patterns, and aspirations (Adeboye & Olorunfemi, 2022). While digital platforms enable creativity, political participation, and global connectivity, they also expose youth to harmful digital subcultures, misinformation, violence-glorifying content, and deviant peer groups that may influence identity development negatively (Ojebode & Aremu, 2023b).

Nigeria continues to grapple with the alarming rise of banditry, kidnapping, and related violent crimes, especially in the northern regions. Existing studies often attribute these crimes to poverty, unemployment, weak governance, environmental pressures, and proliferation of small arms (Okoli & Ugwu, 2021a). However, there is growing evidence that digital environments—through their anonymity, algorithm-driven content, and peer validation mechanisms—play an increasingly important role in shaping youth worldviews and potentially reinforcing narratives that legitimize violence or criminality (Hassan, 2023). Online platforms have sometimes glamorized criminal lifestyles, disseminated anti-state ideologies, and enabled networks that facilitate violent activities. Yet, the socio-psychological processes through which digital interactions shape youth identity in ways that may connect to banditry and kidnapping remain insufficiently explored.

The motivation for this study stems from the urgent need to understand how digital experiences intersect with identity formation among Nigerian youth at a time of growing national insecurity. Policymakers, community leaders, educators, and security agencies require nuanced insights into how digital socialization contributes to either pro-social or anti-social identity outcomes among young people. Such insights are crucial for developing preventive interventions, digital citizenship frameworks, and counter-narratives that address the root causes of youth involvement in criminal networks rather than merely responding to the consequences.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to cybercrime, online radicalization, and youth violence, a major gap persists in the literature. Few studies have specifically examined the link between digital socialization, identity formation, and the emergence of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria (Usman & Ibrahim, 2022a). Existing research tends to focus on structural drivers or operational aspects of criminality while overlooking the ways digital interactions shape identity trajectories that may predispose vulnerable youth to deviant behaviour. This gap highlights the need for a deeper exploration of the psychological, cultural, and digital mechanisms underlying youth involvement in violent criminal activities.

The novelty of this study lies in its interdisciplinary approach, integrating digital sociology with peace and security studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of youth criminality. It goes beyond behavioural explanations by focusing on identity formation as a critical dimension of the problem. Additionally, the study adopts a context-specific lens that situates digital identity transformations within Nigeria's socio-political realities, particularly in regions severely affected by insecurity. It also contributes new insights into how digital citizenship education and online counter-narratives can be used strategically to prevent youth recruitment into banditry and kidnapping networks.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Theoretical Framework

Social Identity Theory, as formulated by Tajfel and Turner in 1979, suggests that people obtain part of their self-concept from the social groups they belong to. Identity is determined by three major cognitive processes: social categorization (by which persons categorize themselves and others as members of groups); social identification or the process whereby persons adopt norms, values, and behaviours that

characterize their groups; and social comparison, which refers to groups evaluating themselves in relation to others for the purpose of enhanced collective self-esteem. These processes influence how individuals perceive themselves and others and, thereby, influence behavior at both a personal and a collective level.

These identity processes are increasingly operating within digital environments in the digital era. Youth interact, communicate, and construct meaning within these environments. Digital platforms like TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, Telegram, and X have become powerful spaces for negotiating identity and maintaining group boundaries more rapidly than in traditional offline arenas. Research evidence indicates that online spaces amplify identity salience by making group symbols, narratives, and norms more visible and accessible (Nweke, 2024). The algorithmic exposure and peer validation mechanisms, like likes and comments, mean that young people are constantly comparing themselves along group lines that continuously shape their digital and offline identities (Sherpa Research, 2016).

SIT is particularly applicable for explaining why the youth in Nigeria would be attracted to either deviant online communities or any other criminal subcultures. Digital platforms facilitate groups that legitimize or glorify violence, materialism, and rebellion; these groups create alternative identities promising belonging, status, and power. Youth who suffer from economic hardship, social exclusion, or weak institutional support may find these groups alluring and adopt their norms and behavioral scripts through continuous digital engagement and exposure (Yusof et al., 2021). A young person, after identifying with such a group, starts to internalize group norms, including justifications of violence or criminality, as SIT would predict.

In contexts of insecurity, like the phenomenon of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria, the influence of social identity processes becomes all the more salient. Often, criminal networks manifest as highly cohesive groups, replete with symbols, narratives, and moral codes that ensure loyalty and solidarity. Online communication networks-closed WhatsApp groups, Telegram channels, or social media pages-serve as spaces where group identity is narrated, celebrated, and defended. These digital groups often legitimize banditry as an economic or social pathway, framing victims or state actors as outgroups-a fact that has been asserted by SIT in light of ingroup-outgroup distinctions shaping hostile behaviour (UNIDIR, 2024).

It is also the case that the digital environment hastens the diffusion of criminal norms due to peer influence and group reinforcement. Tales of successful kidnappings, shows of firearms, and stories of illicitly acquired wealth spread within groups and foster pride and a sense of superiority among members. This is in line with what SIT theorizes—that people try to maintain a positive group identity and will sometimes adopt behaviors viewed as improving perceived group status, even if those behaviors are harmful (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Digital socialization, therefore, fortifies an identity foundation on which banditry and kidnapping networks recruit and retain members.

Situating SIT within the context of digital socialization thus provides gainful insights into how to design preventive and rehabilitative interventions. Online counter-narratives, identity-based digital campaigns, and the creation of prosocial youth communities are some strategies that could potentially weaken the appeal of the deviant identities. There is evidence that replacing criminal group identities with alternative positive group memberships, like entrepreneurial networks, educational communities, or civic engagement, reduces vulnerability to criminal recruitment. Nweke, 2024 thus places SIT as a powerful lens through which to examine how digital environments are shaping youth identity and a theoretical foundation from which to address the growing challenges of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria.

### 3. Conceptual Framework

#### 3.1 Concept of Digital Socialization

Digital socialization refers to the process through which individuals, especially young people, acquire norms, values, skills, and behavioural patterns through interactions within digital environments. Unlike traditional socialization agents such as family, school, and religious institutions, digital platforms operate as pervasive and continuous spaces where learning occurs experientially and informally. As technology becomes more embedded in everyday life, young people increasingly turn to online environments for information, connection, and identity validation (Livingstone & Third, 2020). This shift has redefined the landscape of social learning, making digital platforms key influencers in youth development.

The widespread adoption of smartphones and social media in Nigeria has intensified this transformation. Digital spaces such as Facebook, TikTok, WhatsApp, and Instagram have become primary communication channels for youth, influencing how they relate with

peers, consume information, and express themselves (Adeboye & Olorunfemi, 2022). These platforms foster virtual communities where cultural norms, language patterns, and social expectations are transmitted and reinforced. Consequently, digital socialization shapes how Nigerian youth interpret societal trends, engage with public issues, and perceive their roles in society.

Moreover, digital environments function as powerful socializing agents because they offer interactivity, immediacy, and anonymity. These features provide young people with the flexibility to explore different viewpoints and identities without the constraints associated with face-to-face interactions. Scholars argue that these affordances allow digital platforms to socialize youth more intensely than traditional institutions, given their 24-hour accessibility and global reach (Katz & Crocker, 2021a). Such environments expose users to diverse influences—from peer-generated content to global pop culture—thereby broadening the spectrum of social learning.

Digital socialization produces a mix of positive and negative developmental outcomes. On one hand, it encourages innovation, creativity, digital entrepreneurship, and civic engagement by providing access to educational content and global networks (Katz & Crocker, 2021b; Yahaya, 2023a). Many Nigerian youths have leveraged social media for learning new skills, building online businesses, and participating in social activism. Thus, digital platforms can enhance socioeconomic mobility and promote inclusive knowledge sharing. On the other hand, digital socialization also exposes young people to risks such as misinformation, cyberbullying, online fraud, hate speech, and harmful subcultures. Algorithmic systems curate content that may glamorize risky behaviours, including violence and criminal lifestyles (Katz & Crocker, 2021b; Afolabi & Shadare, 2022). These negative influences can distort perceptions of reality and increase susceptibility to harmful behaviours. In fragile contexts like Nigeria—where economic inequality and weak social structures persist—the adverse effects of digital socialization can be particularly pronounced, making it a double-edged phenomenon.

#### 3.2 Youth Identity Formation in the Digital Age

Identity formation is a critical developmental task during adolescence and young adulthood, involving the exploration and internalization of values, beliefs, and roles. Digital technologies have transformed this process by providing new spaces where identities can be explored, constructed, and displayed. Social media

platforms allow youth to curate aspects of their lives, experiment with multiple personas, and engage with diverse audiences who influence their sense of self (Boyd, 2014). As a result, identity formation in the digital age has become increasingly dynamic and externally oriented.

Drawing from Eriksonian theory, identity formation involves periods of exploration followed by commitment to certain roles and values. Social media accelerates this cycle by providing instant feedback mechanisms—such as likes, comments, and shares—that signal peer acceptance or rejection (Buckingham, 2021a). These social cues influence how young people evaluate their self-worth, aspirations, and social belonging. Digital environments also expose youth to global cultural flows, including fashions, ideologies, and lifestyles, which they integrate into their evolving personal identities.

In Nigeria, digital content plays an especially influential role in shaping youth aspirations and worldview. Weak traditional socialization structures—such as limited mentorship, unstable family systems, and overburdened educational institutions—often leave young people dependent on digital platforms for guidance and identity affirmation (Hassan, 2023). As such, Nigerian youth turn to online communities to define what success, beauty, morality, and modernity mean. This reliance makes digital culture a powerful determinant of identity development.

Where digital platforms foster such positive identity outcomes as empowerment, self-expression, and cultural pride, they equally influence more troubling identity shifts. Social media shapes body image concerns, consumerist behaviors, political polarization, and even religious reorientation among Nigerian youth, studies show (Buckingham, 2021b). These influences thus bring up the complex interplay between digital exposure and social development.

Additionally, the rise of deviant digital identities poses significant societal concerns. Online visibility and peer validation have contributed to the glorification of criminal personas, such as “Yahoo boys,” gang members, and violent subcultures. These identities are often reinforced through music videos, online bragging, and digital peer groups that normalize fraud, violence, and materialism (Ojebode & Aremu, 2023a). When youth perceive such identities as pathways to recognition or economic advancement, they may adopt behaviours that predispose them to anti-social and criminal activities.

### 3.3 Digital Exposure and Links to Violent Behaviour

Digital socialization can escalate into a risk factor for violence when young people are exposed to harmful ideologies, narratives, and networks online. Scholars argue that social media environments often contain content promoting aggression, fraud, drug use, and hostility toward authority figures (Ojedokun & Idowu, 2021). Continuous exposure to such material may desensitize youth to violence and normalize harmful behaviours. For vulnerable individuals, these online influences can erode moral boundaries and reshape attitudes toward violence.

A key driver of this risk is the algorithmic architecture of digital platforms. Social media algorithms prioritize content that elicits strong emotional reactions, such as anger or excitement, thereby amplifying sensational or harmful materials (Tufekci, 2015). Once a user engages with content related to violence or deviance, the algorithm frequently recommends similar content, creating echo chambers that reinforce violent norms. These digital bubbles can intensify radicalization and encourage identification with deviant subcultures.

In Northern Nigeria, where socio-economic challenges and insecurity are prevalent, the effects of digital exposure can be particularly severe. Studies indicate that some online communities circulate videos of kidnapping operations, armed confrontations, extremist preaching, and celebratory gun displays (Hassan, 2023). Such content may glamorize violent lifestyles or portray criminals as role models. For marginalized youth seeking belonging or economic survival, these online narratives can appear attractive and aspirational.

Furthermore, digital platforms can serve as recruitment infrastructures for criminal and extremist groups. Violent networks exploit social media to disseminate propaganda, recruit members, coordinate activities, and maintain communication. For unemployed or socially alienated youth, these groups may provide a sense of identity, purpose, and community that they lack offline. Exposure to such recruitment strategies increases the likelihood of involvement in violence and organized crime.

The cumulative effect of exposure to violent content, interaction within deviant digital communities, and reinforcement by algorithms can significantly alter youth behaviour and worldview. In contexts where traditional institutions provide limited guidance, digital platforms may shape youths’ perceptions of power, masculinity, and survival. As a result, digital exposure becomes not just a passive influence but an

active contributor to the sociocultural normalization of violence.

### **3.4 Banditry and Kidnapping in Nigeria: Drivers and Dynamics**

Banditry and kidnapping have evolved into major security threats in Nigeria, particularly affecting the North-West and North-Central regions. These crimes have shifted from isolated incidents to systemic forms of violence that disrupt social order, weaken economic activities, and erode community resilience. Scholars emphasize that the rise of banditry is linked to deep structural issues embedded within Nigeria's socio-economic and political landscape, such as persistent poverty, unemployment, and limited state presence in rural areas (Okoli & Ugwu, 2021b). As a result, banditry has increasingly become an alternative economic pathway for marginalized groups who lack access to legitimate livelihoods.

Weak governance and institutional failures further compound the insecurity crisis. Many rural communities suffer from inadequate policing, corruption within security agencies, and slow judicial processes that create impunity for criminal actors (Adewale, 2022a). The absence of effective state enforcement allows bandit groups to exert territorial influence, extort local populations, and establish governance structures parallel to formal authorities. This governance vacuum contributes to the entrenchment of criminal networks and complicates efforts to dismantle them.

Environmental pressures, particularly climate change and resource depletion, have also intensified conflicts that feed into banditry. Desertification, shrinking farmlands, and competition over water sources have escalated farmer-herder clashes, providing fertile ground for violence and criminality (Okoli & Ugwu, 2021a). Many displaced individuals, especially youth from pastoral communities, become vulnerable to recruitment by bandit groups that promise protection, income, or social belonging. Thus, environmental degradation intersects with socio-economic marginalization to fuel the crisis.

Arms proliferation represents another significant driver, enabling bandit groups to operate with heightened sophistication and destructive capacity. Weapons flow across porous borders from the Sahel region, allowing criminal networks to access high-grade rifles, ammunition, and military-style equipment (Adewale, 2022b). These armaments enhance not only the defensive capabilities of bandit groups but also their ability to stage large-scale attacks, kidnap en

masse, or resist security interventions. The criminal ecosystem is further supported by informants, intermediaries, and local collaborators who facilitate logistics and provide intelligence.

Recent studies highlight a growing digital dimension to banditry, marking a shift in the operational dynamics of these criminal enterprises. Mobile phones and digital communication tools are now commonly used for ransom negotiation, surveillance, and coordination of attacks (Alubankudi, 2023a). Additionally, videos of attacks or armed displays often circulate online, amplifying public fear and contributing to the mythologization of bandit groups. Despite this evolution, there is limited scholarship exploring how digital identity formation influences youth participation or recruitment into banditry, leaving a critical gap that this study intends to address.

### **3.5 Intersection of Digital Socialization and Violent Identity Formation**

Digital socialization increasingly interacts with the formation of violent identities, particularly among youth who face socio-economic exclusion, limited opportunities, and weak social support systems. Online platforms create alternative spaces where marginalized individuals seek belonging, validation, and recognition that they may not receive in their offline environments (Boyd, 2014). When these digital spaces promote or normalize deviant behaviour, they can shape identity trajectories toward violence or criminality. For example, sensationalized portrayals of armed bandits or criminals on TikTok and Facebook may create fascination or admiration among vulnerable youth (Hassan, 2023).

One of the mechanisms through which this occurs is the symbolic reward system embedded in digital platforms. Likes, comments, shares, and followers create social hierarchies that can elevate criminal personas to celebrity status. This digital visibility encourages imitation, as young people may perceive criminal behaviour as a pathway to recognition or influence. Over time, such exposure rewires social aspirations, making violent or deviant lifestyles appear legitimate or desirable within certain online communities.

Digital anonymity also plays a powerful role in shaping violent identities. Youth can interact with criminal elements, view extremist content, or participate in deviant online forums without facing immediate social or legal consequences (Usman & Ibrahim, 2022b). This reduces inhibitions, accelerates radicalization, and allows individuals to experiment

with violent narratives or behaviours. The anonymity provided by encrypted messaging apps further facilitates connections with criminal networks, enhancing the risk of recruitment into offline violent activities (Alubankudi, 2023b).

Social learning theory provides a useful lens for understanding these processes. The theory posits that individuals learn behaviours through observation, imitation, and reinforcement. Within digital environments, youth repeatedly observe violent acts, narratives, and symbols that are rewarded with attention or praise. Consistent exposure reinforces cognitive scripts that rationalize violence, eventually influencing offline behaviour (Boyd, 2014). As such, digital socialization does not merely reflect youth identities—it actively produces and shapes them.

These dynamics demonstrate that digital platforms serve as both mirrors and architects of violent identity formation. When combined with poverty, unemployment, or weak family structures, digital influences can become decisive factors in pushing youth toward criminal networks, including banditry. Understanding this intersection is therefore essential for developing holistic interventions that address both digital and offline drivers of youth violence.

### **3.6 Digital Citizenship, Online Safety, and Prevention Strategies**

Digital citizenship refers to the responsible, ethical, and safe use of digital technologies, encompassing skills such as critical thinking, empathy, online etiquette, and awareness of digital rights and risks. Scholars argue that enhancing digital citizenship among youth can mitigate online harms by equipping them to navigate misinformation, harmful content, and digital manipulation (Ribble, 2021). However, in many developing countries, including Nigeria, digital citizenship remains an underdeveloped concept. Most young people engage with social media without adequate guidance on ethical digital behaviour or online risk management (Yahaya, 2023b).

Digital literacy levels in Nigeria are generally low, especially in rural and low-income communities. This gap contributes to vulnerabilities such as exposure to cyberbullying, online fraud, and recruitment into deviant groups. Without basic skills in evaluating online information, youth may internalize harmful narratives or fall prey to digital traps created by criminal actors. The absence of structured digital citizenship curricula in schools and communities exacerbates these challenges, leaving young people to learn digital behaviours informally and inconsistently.

Scholars advocate for several preventive strategies to counter the negative impacts of digital socialization. One key intervention is the development of counter-narratives that challenge the glamorization of violence or criminal lifestyles online. These counter-narratives can promote positive role models, emphasize the consequences of criminal behaviour, and provide alternative aspirations for at-risk youth (Adewale, 2022a). When disseminated strategically, they can influence the digital ecosystem in ways that discourage violent identity formation.

Strengthening parental and community digital supervision is another important strategy. Many parents lack the digital skills needed to guide their children online, leading to unsupervised and risky digital engagement. Community-based digital literacy campaigns can bridge this gap by equipping both youth and caregivers with knowledge about online safety, cyber ethics, and responsible digital participation. Such programs have the potential to reduce exposure to harmful content and enhance resilience against digital manipulation.

Integrating digital citizenship into national security strategies represents a promising frontier for policy innovation. Given the role of digital platforms in facilitating criminality and radicalization, preventive measures must be embedded within broader security frameworks. This includes collaboration between government agencies, educational institutions, civil society, and technology companies to promote safe digital environments. Although such approaches are still emerging in Nigeria, they hold significant potential for reducing youth involvement in violence and strengthening digital resilience.

In summary, the literature highlights the profound influence of digital socialization on youth identity formation, particularly in contexts of socio-economic vulnerability. However, existing research largely fails to connect these digital identity processes to the rise of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria. This study fills that gap by exploring how digital environments shape identity trajectories that may predispose youth to or protect them from involvement in violent criminal activities. It also contributes novel insights into the potential of digital citizenship frameworks as preventive tools against insecurity.

## **4. Method and Materials**

This study employs a qualitative research design grounded in an interpretive paradigm to explore how digital socialization influences youth identity

formation within the context of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria. Qualitative inquiry is considered appropriate because processes such as identity development, digital behaviour, and socio-cultural interpretations require depth, meaning-making, and contextual analysis rather than numerical measurement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This design allows for a nuanced exploration of the narratives, online experiences, and symbolic interactions that shape youth motivations, vulnerabilities, and behavioural patterns.

The study is based entirely on secondary data, drawing from peer-reviewed journal articles, policy documents, security reports, digital behaviour studies, and books on youth identity and digital sociology. Secondary data enables broad engagement with interdisciplinary scholarship across digital sociology, criminology, psychology, and peace and conflict studies (Bowen, 2009). Documentary materials reviewed include studies on digital socialization in Africa, youth identity development, online risks and cyber behaviours, and reports on banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria, as well as policy frameworks from national and international security institutions. Sources were accessed through academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, ResearchGate, and institutional repositories.

Data collection followed a systematic documentary review approach. Keywords such as digital socialization, youth identity, banditry, kidnapping, digital citizenship, online deviance, and youth radicalization guided the search process, which aligned with the PRISMA guidelines adapted for qualitative studies (Moher et al., 2015). Selected documents were subjected to repeated readings to extract relevant concepts, patterns, and relationships. Data analysis was conducted using qualitative content analysis, incorporating both inductive and deductive coding strategies. Inductive coding allowed new themes to emerge from the literature, while deductive coding drew on predefined concepts such as identity formation, digital exposure, and drivers of insecurity (Schreier, 2012). Analysis proceeded through open coding, axial coding, and selective coding, ultimately developing integrated patterns that explain how digital experiences shape identity trajectories linked to violent behaviour.

To maintain methodological rigour, inclusion and exclusion criteria were applied during document selection. Included materials were published between 2010 and 2024; written in English; peer-reviewed or institutionally credible; and focused on digital socialization, youth identity, online deviance, violent

crimes in Nigeria, or digital citizenship. Excluded materials consisted of publications before 2010, unverified blogs or opinion pieces, low-credibility sources, and studies unrelated to youth, digital behaviour, or insecurity. Ethical considerations centred on accurate and objective representation of authors' viewpoints, proper citation practices, and cautious handling of sensitive security information, especially regarding operational details or identities of victims and perpetrators (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

## 5. Results and Discussion of Findings

The analysis of secondary data generated four major themes that illuminate the relationship between digital socialization, youth identity formation, and the rise of banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria. The themes are follows: (1) Digital Environments as New Socializing Agents, (2) Digital Identity Shifts and Youth Vulnerability, (3) Online Glorification of Violence and Criminal Subcultures, and (4) Weak Digital Citizenship and Limited Protective Structures. Each of the aforementioned is elaborated in the subsequent paragraphs.

First, digital environments have evolved into powerful socializing agents for Nigerian youth, functioning in ways that rival or even surpass traditional institutions such as the family, school, and religious organizations. With the ubiquity of smartphones and cheap data access, young people spend a significant portion of their time interacting with digital platforms, making these spaces central to their learning and behavioural conditioning (Adeboye & Olorunfemi, 2022). TikTok, Instagram, WhatsApp, and other platforms increasingly define what young people consider acceptable behaviour, desirable lifestyles, and modern values. The algorithmic design of these platforms ensures constant exposure to peer-driven norms, further reinforcing their role as primary sources of socialization.

The exposure to global cultures, languages, and ideologies through digital media broadens youth perspectives but simultaneously complicates their developmental trajectories. Nigerian youth encounter diverse content—ranging from entertainment to political activism—that shapes their understanding of identity, success, and social belonging. As Livingstone and Third (2020) argue, digital environments introduce complex layers of mediated experiences that influence young people's sense of self far beyond what local social institutions traditionally provided. This global exposure creates hybrid identities that blend local realities with aspirational digital cultures.

Digital platforms also shape interpersonal relationships by defining how young people communicate, negotiate friendships, and build social networks. Many youths learn communication norms online, adopting humour styles, slang, emotional expressions, and relationship expectations modeled by digital influencers and social media communities (Ojedokun & Idowu, 2021). The preference for online communication over face-to-face interaction further cements digital platforms as the centre of contemporary youth socialization. Consequently, the shift from traditional to digital socialization affects emotional development, conflict resolution skills, and the value placed on community life.

Peer validation remains a dominant force behind digital behaviour, with likes, shares, and comments functioning as modern tools of social approval. Nigerian youth increasingly equate digital engagement with personal worth, leading to behaviours aimed at maintaining online popularity or relevance (Livingstone & Third, 2020). For youth living in economically fragile environments, this validation often replaces traditional support systems weakened by poverty, displacement, or institutional failures. This dynamic amplifies the influence of digital norms over offline expectations.

The implications of this shift are profound, particularly in regions of northern Nigeria where structural vulnerabilities heighten dependence on digital spaces for identity construction and social learning. Weak educational systems, family instability, and limited recreational opportunities make digital platforms the default source of information and guidance for many young people. As Ojedokun and Idowu (2021) observe, when traditional socializing structures weaken, youth gravitate toward digital environments as alternative communities. This transformation signals the need for policy and social interventions that recognize the centrality of digital platforms in shaping youth behaviour, aspirations, and worldviews.

Second, digital identity shifts and youth vulnerability is an important theme of this study. Digital platforms have become critical sites for identity formation among Nigerian youth, enabling constant experimentation with personas, styles, and affiliations. Online spaces provide young people with opportunities to construct and showcase identities that may differ significantly from their offline realities. According to Boyd (2014), the digital environment facilitates identity rehearsal, where youth try out ideas, behaviours, and self-presentations in search of belonging. This process allows for creativity but also

exposes youth to the influence of online communities with questionable norms.

The formation of digital identities is increasingly driven by trends, viral content, and influencer lifestyles that shape what young people perceive as desirable or aspirational. For many Nigerian youths, aligning with online cultures such as activism, fashion, music, or cyber subcultures becomes a way to gain digital recognition and emotional validation (Okoro & Musa, 2022a). These identities, however, may conflict with societal expectations or embed values that normalize deviance. Youth adopt online personas not merely for entertainment but as survival strategies in environments marked by exclusion and socio-economic uncertainty.

A growing concern is the absorption of harmful narratives circulated within digital communities that promote rebellion, hostility toward the state, or engagement with criminal lifestyles. Usman and Ibrahim (2022a) note that vulnerable youth—particularly those facing unemployment or marginalization—are most likely to internalize narratives presenting violence or criminality as legitimate pathways to survival. This trend is exacerbated by algorithms that amplify content similar to what users already engage with, creating echo chambers that reinforce deviant identity formations.

Youth vulnerability intensifies when offline anchors such as family guidance, school engagement, or community mentorship are weak or absent. Without stable offline identity frameworks, young people depend heavily on digital cues to navigate social expectations and self-perception (Boyd, 2014). In such contexts, extremist, hyper-sexualized, or violent digital identities become appealing because they offer pathways to recognition, empowerment, or imagined success. The digital environment thus becomes both a refuge and a risk factor for youths navigating uncertain futures.

The findings underscore the need for structured interventions that strengthen offline support systems, thereby reducing the reliance on digital identity formation. Community engagement programs, mentorship initiatives, and digital literacy education can help youth critically assess online influences and construct healthier identities. As Okoro and Musa (2022b) emphasize, empowering youth with critical awareness reduces susceptibility to harmful online narratives. Addressing digital identity vulnerability is therefore essential for broader efforts to prevent youth involvement in crime, extremism, and anti-social behaviour.

Third, online glorification of violence and criminal subcultures is an essential part of the digital sphere which has become a fertile ground for the glorification of violence, particularly through content portraying bandits, militants, and cybercriminals as powerful and successful. Viral videos and images frequently showcase bandits celebrating after raids, brandishing weapons, or flaunting ransom proceeds, which circulate without adequate monitoring or removal (Hassan, 2023). These portrayals transform criminality into a spectacle that attracts the attention of impressionable youth seeking empowerment, recognition, or economic opportunity.

The normalization of violence online contributes to the social construction of criminal subcultures that appear glamorous or heroic. As Adewale (2022a) argues, criminal groups strategically use digital channels to project attractive narratives that frame illegal activities as legitimate responses to injustice or poverty. This framing resonates deeply with young people who feel disillusioned with societal inequalities or who perceive limited opportunities for upward mobility. The visibility of criminal lifestyles online further blurs the lines between entertainment and real-world violence.

Moreover, digital platforms serve as recruitment channels for criminal groups seeking to exploit vulnerable youth. Recruiters leverage messaging apps, social media posts, and encrypted channels to target individuals with promises of wealth, respect, and protection (Adewale, 2022b). Once youth engage with such content, platform algorithms reinforce their exposure by recommending similar posts and videos, deepening their immersion in violent digital ecosystems (Tufekci, 2015). This cyclical reinforcement accelerates normalization and potential adoption of criminal ideologies.

The glamorization of banditry and violent subcultures simultaneously reshapes youth perceptions of success and social mobility. In regions plagued by poverty, unemployment, and insecurity, many young people interpret the digital celebration of bandits as evidence that criminality is rewarded more than legitimate labour. This perception encourages imitation and admiration of violent actors, positioning them as role models in the absence of accessible positive alternatives (Hassan, 2023). The symbolic power attached to violence thus becomes a form of social capital.

Addressing the digital glorification of violence requires a multi-layered approach involving stronger

content regulation, counter-narrative campaigns, and community sensitization. Governments, tech companies, and civil society must collaborate to ensure the removal of violent content and the promotion of alternative narratives that emphasize peace, resilience, and legitimate pathways to success. As Tufekci (2015) notes, algorithmic systems must be designed with safety considerations to prevent harmful content amplification. Without proactive interventions, digital platforms will continue reinforcing criminal subcultures among vulnerable youth.

Fourth, poor digital citizenship and few protective structures is found in this study as a crucial factor. The findings demonstrate that many Nigerian youths lack adequate digital literacy, leaving them vulnerable to misinformation, manipulation, and risky online behaviours. Digital citizenship is defined as the responsible and ethical use of digital technologies—remains poorly understood across many communities (Ribble, 2021). Schools rarely include digital literacy education in their curricula, leaving students unprepared to navigate the complexities of online environments. This deficiency is particularly concerning given the rapid expansion of digital access across Nigeria.

Parents and guardians also face significant challenges in providing digital supervision due to limited digital skills or lack of awareness about online risks (Afolabi & Shadare, 2022). Many adults cannot differentiate between credible and harmful content, making it difficult to guide youth or establish protective boundaries. This weak intergenerational digital awareness creates a gap in support structures, allowing youth to explore digital spaces without critical oversight. Such unsupervised consumption increases susceptibility to harmful ideologies, scams, and predatory recruitment.

The absence of national or institutional digital citizenship frameworks further deepens youth vulnerability. In Nigeria, there are few coordinated initiatives that promote responsible online behaviour, data privacy awareness, or cyber safety protocols for young people (Yahaya, 2023c). Most digital education programs are donor-driven or limited to urban centres, leaving rural and low-income youth particularly exposed. These disparities create uneven digital competencies across socio-economic groups, reinforcing existing inequalities.

Weak digital citizenship also contributes to identity distortion, misinformation spread, and participation in harmful online trends. Without skills in critical

thinking and content verification, many youths accept online narratives uncritically, regardless of their potential harm (Ribble, 2021). This vulnerability is exploited by criminal groups, political actors, and extremist networks that use digital platforms to manipulate emotions, recruit followers, or incite violence. Youth unprepared to question online messages become easy targets in these dynamics.

Strengthening digital citizenship emerges as a critical pathway for safeguarding youth from online risks and reducing their likelihood of engaging in banditry, cybercrime, or extremist activities. Integrating digital ethics, cyber safety, and critical thinking into school curricula and community programs is essential for building resilience. As Ribble (2021) argues, digital citizenship should be treated as a societal priority in the digital age. Empowering youth with these competencies not only protects them but also contributes to national security and social stability.

In a nutshell, the results collectively show that digital socialization influences youth identity formation in complex ways, shaping both prosocial and antisocial trajectories. When combined with Nigeria's socio-economic vulnerabilities, weak governance, and security challenges, digital influences can facilitate pathways into banditry and kidnapping. The discussion demonstrates the need for holistic interventions involving digital literacy, youth engagement, online regulation, and targeted counter-narratives to mitigate emerging risks.

## 6. Implications of the Study

The findings of this study carry several significant implications for policy, practice, and future research.

First, they underscore the urgent need for the Nigerian government to integrate digital citizenship and online safety education into school curricula. As digital socialization increasingly shapes youth identity, empowering students with skills for critical engagement, responsible participation, and ethical online behavior becomes essential for preventing vulnerability to criminal influences.

Second, the study emphasizes the role of families and communities in the monitoring and guidance of youths' online experiences. Building on more rigorous parent–youth communication, enhanced digital parenting literacy, and setting up community-based mentorship structures would have an indirect impact on mitigating the impact of hazardous online messages.

Third, the study reveals an important implication for security agencies and policymakers. Since online platforms influence the recruitment, radicalization, and coordination strategies of individuals involved in banditry and kidnapping, there is a need for a multidimensional security response that incorporates digital surveillance, early-warning indicators, and youth-centered online counter-narratives. These strategies should be implemented ethically, ensuring respect for privacy rights while prioritizing national security.

Fourth, the study contributes to the practice of social work and youth development by emphasizing the role of psychosocial interventions. Practitioners must be equipped to address identity crises, digital peer pressure, and emotional vulnerabilities that may draw youth toward criminal subcultures. Interventions should be rooted in digital-era realities, integrating offline and online behavioral support systems.

Fifth, the findings imply that civil society organizations and tech companies have important roles to play. Partnerships should be developed to promote content moderation, reduce the visibility of criminally glamorized material, and amplify positive youth development stories. Technology companies can contribute by strengthening algorithmic transparency and providing tools that help youths control their digital experiences.

Finally, the study has implications for future research, suggesting the need for interdisciplinary exploration of digital socialization, youth psychology, and criminology. Researchers may examine comparative contexts, longitudinal changes in digital identity formation, and the impact of emerging technologies such as AI-driven content generation and virtual communities. Overall, the implications point toward a comprehensive and collaborative approach to addressing youth involvement in banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria through an informed understanding of digital socialization processes.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlights the pivotal role of digital socialization in shaping youth identity formation and its implications for banditry and kidnapping in Nigeria. Findings indicate that online platforms serve as powerful socializing agents, influencing youths' perceptions, behaviours, and affiliations. Exposure to harmful content, glorification of criminal subcultures, and weak digital literacy contribute to identity shifts that increase vulnerability to involvement in violent criminal activities. Conversely, digital spaces also

offer opportunities for positive socialization, skill acquisition, and civic engagement if properly guided. Addressing these dynamics requires an integrated approach that combines digital literacy, community engagement, policy interventions, and preventive security strategies. By understanding the interplay between digital environments and youth identity, stakeholders can design effective interventions to curb youth participation in banditry and kidnapping while promoting positive development and social resilience. Based on the overall findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

Schools, communities, and educational authorities should integrate digital literacy and citizenship education into curricula to equip youths with skills for critical evaluation of online content, responsible participation, and ethical digital behaviour.

Parents, guardians, and community leaders should actively monitor and guide youths' online activities, fostering open communication, mentorship, and supervision to counter negative digital influences.

Security agencies, civil society organizations, and media platforms should create and promote online content that challenges the glorification of violence and criminal lifestyles, offering positive role models and narratives that encourage lawful and pro-social behaviour.

Policymakers should adopt multidimensional strategies that combine traditional security measures with digital monitoring, early-warning systems, and collaboration with tech companies to address online recruitment and radicalization ethically and effectively.

Government and non-governmental organizations should provide socio-economic opportunities, vocational training, and psychosocial support to vulnerable youth, reducing the allure of criminal networks by offering alternative pathways for recognition, income, and social belonging.

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