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Article

# Online Success as Horizon of Survival: Children and the Digital Economy in Lagos, Nigeria

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## Abstract

Literature on the impact of the digital ecosystem on youth is largely grounded on Western case studies and Eurocentric in its working assumptions; yet African children and teenagers—who account for most of the continent’s population—have been early adopters of social media’s possibilities and are exposed to distinctive risks. This article shows how, in the absence of viable institutional structures for self-actualization in post-liberalization Nigeria, digital platforms turn children into central actors of economic flexibility. With transitional pathways disappearing, formal employment and traditional markers of adulthood are no longer on the horizon of African youths. Uncertainty, hustling, and extraordinary aspirations are part and parcel of their socialization process, with “survival” and “success” increasingly perceived as intertwined, requiring everyone, from the youngest age, to “perform.” From rags-to-riches stories of viral children groups to racist images and videos of children feeding China’s livestreaming boom and the meme culture across the world, commodified African childhood is projected into the flows of digital popular culture, enabled by legal and socioeconomic vulnerability and the internalization of visibility as an avenue of opportunity. Nigeria in particular, with the world’s largest population of out-of-school children on the one hand, and an internationally booming entertainment industry on the other, delineates a palpable, yet unsustainable mode of aspiration and wealth acquisition through engagement with social media. This article draws on a year-long ethnographic investigation in Lagos among (a) groups of teenage aspiring dancers seeking to “blow” online and (b) marketing professionals who use children in their commercial strategies.

## Keywords

African youth; digital economy; hope labor; African cultural industries; Nigeria; Global South

## Issue

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## 1. Introduction

“Entrepreneur,” “public figure,” or even “entertainment mogul”—these descriptors are all commonly found in the biography section of Lagos teenagers’ online profiles. With the prospect of social reproduction foreclosed for the majority of African youths (Biaya, 2000; Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006; Honwana, 2012; Simone, 2006), “survival” and “success” are increasingly perceived as intertwined, requiring everyone, from the youngest age, to “perform.” The liberalization of African economies introduced by the Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP) in the late 20th century caused an “immense sense of

anguish among an entire generation of young, educated persons” (Mbembe & Roitman, 1995, p. 350), yet today’s African children and teenagers are growing up in an environment where the condition of flexibility has largely been normalized (Piot, 2010). The existential anxiety that their parents experienced witnessing the unraveling of postcolonial economic structures—and, with them, the aspirations associated with middle-class respectability—has become an internalized and individualized condition. Uncertainty, hustling, and extraordinary aspirations are part and parcel of the contemporary socialization process for average African children (Cooper & Pratten, 2015; Langevang, 2008; Thieme, 2018; Weiss, 2009).

Nigeria, in particular, has the world's largest population of out-of-school children (UNESCO, 2022). In this context of extreme precarity, youths appropriate digital platforms' affordances to perform their aspirations, but are also enacted as resources themselves. From rags-to-riches stories of viral children groups, such as Ikorodu Bois in Nigeria or The Ghetto Kids in Uganda, to the exploitative use of images of anonymous African children fueling the Chinese live-streaming boom and the global meme culture, commodified African childhood is projected into the flows of digital popular culture. This is enabled by legal and socioeconomic vulnerability and the internalization of visibility as an avenue of opportunity.

Young Africans are expected to account for close to half of the world's youth by 2030 (Population Reference Bureau, 2019). With half of its inhabitants aged 18 or under (United Nations Population Fund, 2023), Lagos is predicted to become the most populated city in the world (Hoorweg & Pope, 2017). African children's interactions with the digital ecosystem thus offer critical insight into present and future global dynamics. Furthermore, Alessandro Jedlowski argues in relation to the Lagos film industry that social changes and risks carried by media transformations tend to "manifest themselves first, and with their sharpest and most immediate consequences, in the [Global] South" (2016, p. 174). As the "frontier in the unfolding history of neoliberalism," Africa can be considered to be "running ahead" of Euro-America (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2012). In a giant media market such as Nigeria, the "government's light handedness" on digital companies and the media industries indeed "allows for testing practical commercial arrangements and if one doesn't work, one can remodel at almost no cost" (Oyeniya, 2016, para. 15). While celebrated for the tremendous growth that it has brought to the Lagos entertainment industries (Krings & Simmert, 2020; Okoli & Atelhe, 2018; Olusoji, 2015; Simon, 2022), the nimbleness of the Nigerian digital media ecosystem means that children are exposed and exploited as part of various digital strategies. This condition deserves particular attention, especially since digital media in Africa is increasingly constructed as a space for social experimentation by both local and multinational actors (Gravett, 2020).

Bringing together literatures on the "hope boom" (Kleist & Jansen, 2016) in Africanist anthropology and "hope labor" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013) in the creative industries, this article shows how in the absence of viable institutional structures for self-actualization, the perceived opportunities associated with performance on digital platforms are positioning children and teenagers as central actors of economic flexibility. Premised on the productivity of uncertainty (Cooper & Pratten, 2015), anthropological studies of urban African youth describe a subjectivity significantly orientated towards future success (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Guyer, 2007; Sarró, 2015; Turner, 2015), organized by the cultural principle of

chance, or the miracle. "Hope labor," in contrast typically deployed in Western contexts, "keeps people chasing illusory outcomes" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 17) through the logic of investment in one's employment prospects. The intersection of the African "hope boom" with "hope labor" is epitomized by the pidgin phrase *e don blow*, which captures the aspiration to valorize youth leisure pursuits in Lagos, the commercial capital of Nigeria and home to its thriving entertainment industries. "Blowing" refers to gaining access overnight (through a viral song, dance, or skit) to online popularity that will unlock the virtuous cycle of monetization, and structures much of youth's imaginaries around survival and success.

## 2. Research Problem

Africa has over 400 million social media users, and that figure is expected to double by the end of the decade (Statista, 2022). In Nigeria alone, over 100 million people use WhatsApp (Statista, 2022). The instant messaging service commonly mediates social and economic spheres, which impacts children in a particular way in a context where close to half of children aged 5 to 14 work (Enebe et al., 2021; US Department of Labor, 2022). Yet, even as "there have been several thousand studies about the effects of media on youth" (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017), they rarely reflect African experiences. Scholarly debates on social media are largely grounded on Western case studies and Eurocentric in their working assumptions (Costa, 2018). This marginalization is all the more troubling as African teenagers have been early enthusiasts of digital media, investing it spontaneously with "connective ambitions" (Marler, 2022). In her study of Accra Internet cafes in the 2000s, Jenna Burrell describes Ghanaian teenagers' hope to "leverage the barest thread of connection...to hook something from the vast sea of possibilities" (Burrell, 2012, p. 3). The early adoption of digital technology by Lagos youths and its transformative impact on the Nigerian music industry is also well established (Adedeji, 2010; Fry et al., 2018). Relegated to African studies or international development, or confined to local and regional journals, these engagements with digital media, however, rarely inform the broader theoretical frameworks of media studies. This is a general problem in social sciences, with less than 1% of the research samples coming from Africa in some disciplines (Mughogho et al., 2023). While there is growing consensus that the relationship between youth and media requires nuanced, empirically grounded research to make sense of the "sweeping and rapid changes in the media landscape" (Valkenburg & Piotrowski, 2017), our understanding is limited if it excludes whole sections of the world population, while media strategies in the digital age are increasingly global in scope.

The "Grand Visions of connectivity" (Friederici et al., 2017) promoted by international organizations have often attributed a self-evident developmental impact to

the digital inclusion of African youths, even if unsupported by empirical evidence. Policy actors' focus on bridging the digital divide leaves a blind spot as to how increased digital access impacts survival strategies in the context of dramatic inequality and equally dramatic aspirations. Addressing this blind spot calls for expanding the notion of digital inclusion to take into account "digital disadvantage" (Stuart, 2020), that is, the qualitative differences in the uses and consequences of technology. This requires empirically grounded research on the situated encounters of African youths with digital technology. Attention to the social imaginaries that shape the moral and material potentialities of digital media is needed to understand its "affordances-in-practice" (Costa, 2018) in contexts very different from the one in which those technologies were initially thought and developed.

In Nigeria, such studies, while numerous, generally have a restricted focus. Most research on digital media's impact on children and adolescents conducted in Nigerian universities has examined the moral aspect of what is perceived as exogenous technologies. The negative effect of "anti-African" values conveyed to youth by social media, particularly in relation to issues of sexuality and family, has received significant attention (Adegboyega, 2020; Bolu-Steve et al., 2022; Chukwu & Onyema, 2019; Ofoegbu, 2022; Onah & Christian, 2014; Orlu-Orlu & Nsereka, 2014). International studies, on the other hand, have mainly addressed risks associated with African youth's use of social media through the lens of political economy and surveillance. There is a common denunciation in Western academic literature of the "corporate takeover" (Haynes, 2018; Jedlowski, 2016), or "recolonization" (Osumare, 2014), of African popular culture involved in the platformization process. The (geo)political stakes of "digital neocolonialism"—the collection of African users' data by foreign companies—have also generated particular interest in the Euro-America, since much of Africa has come to rely on Chinese companies for digital infrastructure (Gravett, 2020).

Re-centering the analysis on users in their specific sociocultural context, this article is innovative in examining Lagos youths' interaction with digital media from below. Taking a bottom-up approach to issues of power and inequality, it shows how the rise of digital media impacts the very way in which children and teenagers in Lagos relate to—or are used by—their direct social and economic environment. It is well established among historians and anthropologists that "youth" is a historically constructed social category and, as a relational concept, its contours fluctuate according to power configurations (Durham, 2000). The dramatic collapse in Africa of rites of passage such as initiation, the transition from school to work, and the delaying of marriage has impacted the construction of youth as a category, restraining young Africans' access to the attributes of adulthood through what has been widely described as "waithood" (De Boeck, 2007; Honwana, 2012; Jua, 2003; Masquelier, 2005). This postmodern ambiguity

is reflected in academic literature, in which "white preadults" are typically "teenagers," while their black counterparts are "youths" (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2006). This liminal space delineated by social and demographic indicators is the site onto which uncertainty, but also possibility, are projected.

As social media repurposes life on the margin through "unlikely" creators (Lin & de Kloet, 2019), I show that the investment in the self that characterizes post-liberalization Africa (Archambault, 2021; Ayorinde & Ajose, 2022; Gilbert, 2019; Serres, 2020; Shipley, 2013) now starts from childhood, reconfiguring the social category of youth. From the surplus population that the SAP had made them into (Ferguson, 2015), youths have emerged as the carriers of future-making aspirations for Africa, the "young continent." Nigeria in particular, with the world's largest population of out-of-school children on the one hand, and an internationally booming youth-led entertainment industry on the other, outlines a palpable, yet unsustainable, trajectory of self-sufficiency that mobilizes the circulation and conversion of value afforded by visibility on digital platforms. In this context, even young children and teenagers seek to deploy an aspirational economic agency on social media. Encouraged by the neoliberal discourse of corporations (Gillespie, 2010; Hoffmann et al., 2018) and development institutions (Friederici et al., 2017; Osumare, 2014), but also by their direct environment, they "find themselves charged with the requirement that they perform as economically active...citizens" (McRobbie, 2007, p. 727), in a similar way that women's "empowerment" has previously been linked to promoting a working identity (Duffy, 2016; Gill, 2008; Koffman & Gill, 2013). At the same time, they are mobilized as a resource themselves in a digital environment governed by commercial concerns.

### 3. Methodology

The data presented in this article is based mainly on one year of in-person ethnography conducted in Lagos in 2019–2020, complemented by five years of daily digital ethnography. The physical component of the research was organized through an affiliation as visiting researcher with the University of Lagos, as part of doctoral research at Oxford University. The fieldwork involved: (a) ethnography among groups of aspiring dancers and singers seeking to "blow" on social media, during which I analyzed their interactions with established artists and corporate structures who use them in their marketing campaigns; and (b) ethnography among entertainment and marketing professionals, during which I analyzed how they conceptualize and use children in their commercial strategies. These two different prongs of the fieldwork will be presented through the two case studies in Section 4.

The aspiring dancers and music artists participating in the study were aged between 14 to 30, with the majority of them between 16 and 20. All considered themselves "youths," and would probably fall within

what scholars call “waithood.” Several of them had dropped out of school and moved to Lagos on their own, while their families lived in different Nigerian states. They were therefore vulnerable, but also extremely autonomous for their young age. Initial research participants were recruited during large events that I attended in Lagos. They showcased their skills during the waiting time before the main acts would come out (a common practice in Nigeria, where over a dozen young people commonly sing or dance during the protracted “warm-up” times) and I would approach them backstage. I explained the project and consent procedure. Few participants were surprised, to the extent that a researcher coming from a European university to study them fit perfectly within the narrative of global visibility that governed their engagement with digital media. I then expanded my recruitment outward through the snowball method. For dancers, I spent time in the urban spaces where groups hang out and practice, and accompanied them to shoot social media content, attended neighborhood events, and sometimes followed them to social and family spaces. Aspiring music artists generally called for a more individuated research dynamic. I developed personal relations with some of them that allowed me to attend hang-out sessions in home studios (which included countless discussions about social media “strategies”) and followed them as they tried to approach industry professionals.

As for entertainment and marketing practitioners, a significant part of their work is devoted to creating and entertaining social ties, which considerably facilitates the anthropologist’s task of establishing connections with informants. They attend conferences, concerts, parties, club nights, music video and advertisement shoots, studio sessions, and other gatherings that cut across the professional and social spheres, while constantly interacting on social media. I quickly became embedded in the hectic dynamic of the entertainment industry and enacted this spatio-social network as my research field. I conducted about 50 semi-structured interviews with key players, each lasting between one and three hours. I used the interviews to gain factual and historical information on the functioning of the industry, while documenting self-presentation practices through elicited biographical narratives. Yet, most of the data underlying this article was obtained through direct observation, informal conversations, and “deep hanging out” (Geertz, 1998). Observations were then discussed with research participants to incorporate their own discursive constructions, while cross-checking them across differently situated informants.

#### 4. Case Studies

##### 4.1. Teenage Aspiring Dancers in Surulere, Lagos

Nigerian children who complete uninterrupted primary and secondary education typically graduate from sec-

ondary school around the age of 16 or 17. Gaining admission to a university is usually a challenge, due to long waiting lists and an opaque selection system that may require significant spending from the applicant’s family. It is thus not uncommon for teenagers to take a forced “gap year” from education, while they wait to gain a place in a university. Higher education has long been considered a prerequisite to the aspirational middle-class life that governed ideals of (self-)development following Nigeria’s independence. However, more and more teenagers are voluntarily choosing to forego it. This is the case of several of the research participants, who aspired to follow the path paved by Nigeria’s hyper-visible pop stars and, increasingly, dancers. At the time of the fieldwork, a handful of young Nigerian dancers had managed to gather hundreds of thousands of online followers and were actively using their platforms for partnerships with corporate brands and Afropop artists. Delineating a new avenue to financial independence and social legitimacy, these figures embodied the possibility of online success for everyone.

Several of the dancers participating in the study met with other teenagers from different impoverished parts of Lagos monthly to showcase their skills in various styles. The events were filmed, and snippets shared on social media in order to attract attention. In a social field increasingly enacted on digital platforms, the gatherings were also intended to develop a sense of community amidst the everyday struggle. This is why some felt that having an entrance fee—sometimes strategically set at a bottle of Coke in hopes of getting noticed by the brand—defeated the purpose. One particular night, a girl who was part of a local dance crew complained: “You ask me to pay to watch my fellow dancers, what kind of nonsense is this?” The sound kept cutting due to issues with the electric generator—a necessary piece of equipment when the national energy company only supplies a few hours of electricity daily. The young organizer took the mic for a public announcement:

Guys, you see why we need this money—to buy fuel for the gen[erator], or we can’t even get sound! So people, don’t forget to keep tagging Coke, Red Bull, Nike, and everyone on your posts—we will get there, they should see us now!

Going through the social media profile of one of the aspiring dancers who participated in my research, the first video that caught my eye was a bright and simple dance routine featuring an abundance of special effects. The colors were those of a prominent Nigerian commercial bank, and the audio and moves described the various financial products offered by the bank. In an environment where corporate sponsorship is considered the ultimate sign of success, I was surprised to find out that one of my young informants was affiliated with such a powerful and respected commercial institution. But it turned out that he was not. This was one among

several videos on his profile meant to attract the attention of large corporations whose resources and symbolic charge Nigerian teenagers dream of tapping into. He had self-choreographed, directed, and painstakingly edited the full one-minute commercial in pursuit of a cash prize. Failing to win, the video remained on his profile as a free advertisement for the bank.

These aspiring dancers typically practiced on the abandoned grounds of the National Stadium, where they shared space with the small community of bicycle motocross (BMX) riders. The BMX riders were featured in a documentary produced by Red Bull's global media arm and released to social media in 2018. Starring young riders with names directly inspired by the Nigerian music industry's successes—Starboy, KK Money, and S King—the corporate-sponsored film was viewed by over ten million people on YouTube at a time when Nigerian media and brands had no knowledge of, let alone interest in, that community. Despite the omnipresence of dance in Nigerian popular culture, dancers as a constituency share the socioeconomic marginality of BMX riders. They have largely been disregarded by Lagos-based companies, with the social stigma of poverty limiting their inspirational potential in the eyes of the public, and in turn their opportunities for sponsorship. In that context, Red Bull “blowing” the BMX riders had redrawn the bounds of the situated imagination of teenagers self-training in the shade of the dilapidated stadium.

The ethnographic scenes above evoke both the contingency and ubiquity of relations, actual or desired, to the sponsorship economy mediated by online platforms. Corporate brands permeate the lifeworld of even those most marginalized from global consumption, such as teenagers in the overcrowded areas of Lagos longing for a way out of poverty. Sponsorship opportunities structure an aspirational path for the future, where other forms of support barely exist. The trajectory of the National Stadium where young Lagos dancers train—a 1970s monument embodying post-colonial state-led modernity—offers a stunning demonstration of why these young Nigerians place their hopes in social media rather than public education. It symbolizes how the state went from a development actor to a nuisance that needs to be overcome. Indeed, after leaving the stadium to decay since the end of the 20th century, in 2020, the Nigerian government demolished without notice the small shops and refreshment spots catering to the various teenage communities that had grown organically in the ruins of the building once meant to inspire youth. Access was limited for dancers and others who used its grounds to nurture dreams fueled by the videos of inspirational Nike ads that they watched on YouTube during their breaks.

The path that corporate brands offer to the Nigerian youth is encapsulated in the popular pidgin phrase *e don blow*. Understood as sudden and unpredictable for those far from the corporate offices where decisions are made—almost an “overnight” process—the phe-

nomenon of “blowing” evokes that of miracles and is a source of hope for many youths who perceive no other opportunities for their future. With a moral dimension grounded in the bible verse from Mark 11:24: (“whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”), it involves “claiming” what is “rightfully” yours by tagging companies on social media, mentioning them in songs and other creative content. The quasi-religious terminology around brand sponsorship is not particular to Nigeria, and circulates through “inspirational” social media clips shared across the Black Atlantic, in which stars explain how they “manifested” their corporate deals. This provides both a conceptual and material framework for negotiating everyday life amidst uncertainty. The organizer of the monthly dance event has been tagging Coca-Cola on his social media posts for over a year. He believes that the marketing team is following his community-building efforts, just waiting for more growth before they reach out for a partnership. Having dropped out of school for lack of job prospects and struggling with severe depression, the imagined sponsorship opportunities give him the strength to create motivational social media content every day. This hope is then passed on to his 13,000 followers (mostly teenagers aspiring to become dancers or artists), packaged in cultural representations shaped by the perceived opportunities offered by corporations.

Toheeb, a recently appointed marketing manager at multinational energy drink company Red Bull, explained to me how his job involved creating ties to the young Lagos hip-hop dance community. The brand is associated with extreme and urban sports across the world, and the multinational sought to retain this specificity even in Nigeria, where such sports have little public traction. Toheeb described fumbling through social media to identify Nigerian hip-hop dancers, unconvinced that such a category even still existed, given the overwhelming visibility gained by Afropop at the expense of foreign genres in recent years. A professional who had started his career as a corporate finance analyst at a bank, Toheeb proceeded to message dancers aged 16 to 25 on video-sharing apps. He was worried that he might not master the codes of his young interlocutors on digital platforms, and apprehensive about their perception of his affiliation with the energy drinks giant. Yet, his fears were quickly dispelled. “I was shocked,” he recalled, “it was as if they had been waiting for me, even the kids were like: ‘Oya let’s work!’” From the perspective of the young dancers, gaining the support of a corporation is indeed understood as a legitimizing step, framed in moral terms. Their social media posts thus frequently indicate “paid partnership”—this is not to comply with consumer protection laws that, if in existence, would hardly be enforced, but to signal their achievement in being a party to transactional (i.e., valuable) relationships.

#### 4.2. Nigerian Marketing Professionals' Use of Children for Online Campaigns

In 2020, the short-form video platforms TikTok and Triller were the emerging marketing tools taking the Nigerian music industry by storm. With virality as their organizing principle, these new digital platforms fed the social and economic imaginary around “blowing.” Rising artists of the time Ckay and Rema, who both started their commercial careers at 18 in Lagos, would go on to reach the top of music charts around the globe with what started as TikTok hits (“Love Nwantiti” and “Calm Down,” respectively). As I was conducting research with various Nigerian music marketing professionals during that period, I witnessed how they were looking to tap into local resources to drive virality. Their conceptualization of the resources lying at their disposal quickly grew to include anonymous African children, whose smiles and energy became a common feature in short-form promotional videos. One example of this strategy is the campaign devised by a Lagos music consultant to promote the song “ODG” by Eltee Skhillz.

“ODG” was released on all digital platforms in January 2022. A few weeks later, a video of children from a Ugandan orphanage dancing to the song gained traction on social media. Unbeknownst to the public—and to the orphanage—the artist’s marketing consultant had layered the song on a video of the children dancing to thank a benefactor. When the orphanage found out about the altered video through social media, its official account liked it and commented on it excitedly. The Lagos music consultant had not previously envisioned that his marketing video might ever travel back to its original creators, but he was relieved to see that the orphanage supported the unapproved use of the children’s image for commercial purposes. On that note, he reached out to the orphanage and coordinated with its director to release a new video by the Ugandan children. The new video, fully synchronized to the song, and further edited by the artist’s public relations team in Nigeria, was then publicly “discovered” and shared by the artist. The children’s eye-catching talent—highlighted through the professional production—received wide-ranging acclaim and the video started to circulate across the continent, taking a life of its own in Europe and North America. The sight of African children confidently dancing despite their modest surroundings (the video was shot on a dirt road) struck a chord with a wide range of constituencies. Countless online blogs and social media pages devoted to Black identity, Afrocentric culture, and entertainment and dance reposted it. With its carefully crafted choreography and enthusiastic solo performances, the video countered the pathological “image of the starving, isolated child” spawned by Western mainstream media (Wesseling, 2009, p. 148).

The response to the children’s dance eventually largely overshadowed the “ODG” song that it was meant

to promote. The marketing consultant in Lagos thus soon conceived a plan to further capitalize on the Ugandan children’s appeal. The children’s group was now to be flown to Lagos and featured in the official music video for the song. The trip itself was widely publicized on social media, narrated through the lens of opportunity. The fact that young kids who are simply trying to survive in an orphanage in Uganda could be invited to experience the glamour of the Nigerian music industry fed the perception of social media virality as productive. The artist’s team in Lagos further wielded this ideological construction, as they did not see the need to financially compensate the children for their performance, convinced that the online fame would in and of itself convert into future benefits for the children and the orphanage. In fact, the children were later invited to London by the BBC and to Paris by the PSG football club, on the basis of the online fame that they gained through the online marketing campaign for “ODG.”

Nigerian music professionals who plug children and teenagers into the cogs of digital capitalism are both a driving force and witnesses to the social dynamics that govern African youth’s engagement with the digital economy. Aware that the stakes of online visibility reach far beyond their own bottom line, they are mediating agents in a complex system of meaning-making, as their actions shape youth imaginaries. The marketing consultant who recruited the Ugandan children lamented to me that desperate Nigerian teenagers sometimes contact him, presenting themselves as willing to do “whatever it takes” to gain visibility, which they associate with emancipation from poverty. In this particular context, “whatever it takes” commonly refers to exploitative ritual practices, which are understood to accelerate the path to fame (Hanmakyugh, 2020; Okwori, 2003; Saliyu et al., 2019). He therefore worries that the “rags-to-riches stories” on social media are leading a precarious new generation astray.

His position, like that of the other millennials managing the Nigerian entertainment industry, is thus ambivalent. Having started his career in his teenage years at the turn of the millennium, at a time when “socially conscious” music was dominant as Nigeria was emerging from military rule, he is well-versed in Nigeria’s visionary history of inclusive development. But today, two decades after the country formally transitioned to a democratic regime, the general sentiment is that the political and economic situation has only gotten worse despite countless artists “denouncing” everyday suffering (Obadare & Adebani, 2010; Yékú, 2022). In these circumstances, he derives his only hope for the country from seeing the young people he works with at least performatively save themselves and become icons of a modern, digital kind of success. He took it upon himself to ensure that the Ugandan children would have “the time of their life” when visiting Lagos for the video shoot, and he was widely celebrated by his colleagues for “mentoring” poor children.

Lagos music professionals generally believe that through branding as a moral and material practice, the entertainment industry guides the new generation in navigating global neoliberal capitalism, in the absence of effective political leadership. Thus, they embed their commercial actions in a moral framework. As they have rapidly and aggressively seized upon the entrepreneurial possibilities offered by the near-universal reach of social media, they challenge the world to rethink how hegemonic structures operate through marginality. Regarding themselves as moral agents of visionary capitalist utopianism (Pier, 2015), they reinterpret their appropriation of capitalist value from children and other marginally situated constituencies as the spearheading of an Africa-based project of modernity and globalization. Aware of the lack of prospects for current-day children, they are keen to value youths' social production as a path to integrate Nigeria's new generation into the global economy. Yet, "whether social production leads to a future career or not, hope labor's work in the present is already done" (Kuehn & Corrigan, 2013, p. 21). In addition to social media firms, the local entertainment and marketing industries valorize children's activities for their own purposes in the present.

## 5. Discussion

With the state-sponsored hopes of the post-independence era receding into the distance, formal employment and middle-class respectability are no longer the horizon—or even the aspiration—of Lagos youths. Early in their lives, they are inducted into a hustling ethos underpinned by stories of fantastic success. AbdouMaliq Simone observes that:

Africa's increased dependence on the city as a locus of imagination, performance, dissimulation, and 'the making of something out of nothing' correspond [sic] with the effort being made to socialize Africans as proficient navigators of the virtualities inherent in ICT and the New Economy. (2006, p. 134)

The discursive construction of digital opportunity "ultimately filters the individual's social activities through the lens of business and marketing" (Hoffmann et al., 2018, p. 209), filling the educational, cultural, and economic vacuum left by the institutional collapse experienced by Nigeria at the turn of the millennium in the wake of the SAP. The digital economy in Lagos is being constructed as a viable option for children and teenagers to invest their future in, as they navigate an environment from which transitional pathways to adulthood have disappeared.

The sense of necessity that characterizes young Nigerians' engagement with social media was eloquently articulated in response to a veteran journalist who decried "the age of meaninglessness." Nigerian artist Banky W commented: "We want to learn but your generation has to teach. We want to read but the govern-

ment must provide libraries. We want to go to school but the lecturers keep going on strike." The theme of forced self-reliance mediated by digital tools pervades Nigerian youth, often in oppositional ways. In the song "Jungle" released to YouTube, aspiring artist Tega Starr sang:

See dem no [they don't] teach us how to make money from school; So we got to learn am [it] from the hood....It's all about the money this is true; Na the only way to make my dreams come true; Was born in the hood with no damn spoon or little food; See our government bad oh; Them no want give a ghetto man job oh; So we dey find [are finding] a way to survive oh; And now SARS don dey threaten [are threatening] our lives oh

With SARS (Special Anti-Robbery Squad) set up in the wake of the SAP to police the rising level of youth crime that followed austerity measures and nowadays focused on cybercrime, the song refers to online scams (in particular, "love scams" on social media) that are (in)famously committed by Nigerian teenagers (Burrell, 2012; Hanafi, 2020). Thus morally ambivalent and ontologically unstable, social media is yet widely constructed by young Nigerians as their only resource in the stifling environment built by their elders and perpetuated by the current government.

Maysoun Sukarieh (2016) has described how in Jordan, the work of the non-profit organization Save the Children converges with the government's interests in creating the organizational as well as subjective conditions for youth entrepreneurship. Sukarieh observed that these efforts are relatively successful—not because of their ideological appeal, but as a result of the economic and other material incentives and constraints that push and pull Jordanian poor children to take up the subject positions that these programs offer them. Where, in other African contexts, the valorization of entrepreneurship and private initiative has similarly been linked to state ideas of progress being overtaken by neoliberalism (Ntarangwi, 2009; Perullo, 2011; Pier, 2015; Shipley, 2013; Stroeken, 2005; Weiss, 2009), the Nigerian entertainment industry has promoted the notion that public education is hopeless at fostering the culture of entrepreneurship necessary to survive in the contemporary environment. In contrast to Rwandan youths who are required to undergo classroom training in "entrepreneurship" for six years in secondary school (Honeyman, 2016), many Nigerian teenagers are dropping out of school precisely because Nigerian education is widely deemed to stifle entrepreneurial spirit and be unable to cope with the demands of a digitally connected world.

## 6. Conclusion

Kuehn and Corrigan explain that "we ultimately know that the realization of our hopes is fundamentally beyond our control. We lack agency, so we hope" (2013,



p. 17). The future-making practices of African youths widely analyzed through the terminology of “hope” can be better characterized as a manifestation of hopelessness, a “loss of belief in the possibility that they can one day become rich through honest work” (Lockwood, 2020, p. 47). Faced with an absence of prospects, countless Lagos youths cling on to the possibility of “blowing” through a digitally viral song, dance, or skit. The unpredictable and seemingly accessible nature of online work fits within a paradigm of uncertainty that emphasizes the barest thread of opportunity, offering a moral and conceptual treatment to the numbing despair that otherwise negates any form of agency to youths, in a system that yet requires them to fend for themselves.

Used to being defined as victims of forces and histories beyond their control, and portrayed as helpless through terminologies such as “waithood,” Lagos youths invest their aspirations into social media precisely for the reasons that make it suspect to scholars analyzing it through the lens of political economy and imperialism. With its negation of scale and power dynamics (Gershon, 2011; Hoffmann et al., 2018) and its performative potential (Adkins, 2005; Lury, 1993), the digital economy—and the neoliberal ideology that underlies it—offers them a trope to reject the exceptionalizing narratives that the African post-SAP generation is usually the subject of. In the process, it extends the costs and risks of digital information production to even further territories, reconfiguring children as responsible for their own salvation.

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### Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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