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## Behavioural Drivers of Youth Unemployment: Implications for Sustainable Participation in the Digital Economy

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### Abstract

*In a world rapidly shifting towards digital economies, Nigerian youth face a unique paradox: high unemployment rates alongside expanding opportunities in the digital sector. This article investigates the behavioral drivers behind youth unemployment in Nigeria and their implications for sustainable participation in the digital economy. Key behavioral factors, such as skills mismatch, limited digital literacy, cultural preference for traditional career paths, and low entrepreneurial drive, are identified as major obstacles. These challenges are compounded by structural barriers, including inadequate digital infrastructure, educational system limitations, and restrictive policy frameworks, which further limit young people's ability to engage in digital work. This paper further highlights the importance of behavior-oriented approaches to address these barriers and enable Nigerian youth to thrive in tech-driven fields. The article advocates for a multi-pronged strategy encompassing digital skills development programs, educational reform, private sector involvement, and community-based initiatives to build both technical competencies and adaptive mindsets. The paper projects that sustainable participation in Nigeria's digital economy requires more than just skill acquisition; it demands a shift in attitudes, greater entrepreneurial ambition, and enhanced adaptability. This holistic approach offers a pathway to reducing youth unemployment and supporting economic growth in an era where digital readiness is key to resilience.*

**Keywords:** Youth Unemployment, Social Sustainability, Digital Economy, Sustainable Development, Economic Participation

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### Introduction

Youth unemployment is a growing crisis in Nigeria, where over one-third of the youth population remains without stable employment. This issue is fuelled by various

factors, including limited job opportunities, a rapidly growing population, and challenges in the education system that leave many young people unprepared for the demands of the modern workforce (NBS, 2022). According to

the National Bureau of Statistics, the youth unemployment rate in Nigeria has hovered around 42.5% in recent years, creating socio-economic challenges that affect both individual livelihoods and national development (Olawole, 2023). High unemployment rates among young people often lead to increased poverty, social unrest, and a rise in informal and underpaid work, which fails to provide adequate income or job security. The socio-economic impacts of this unemployment crisis extend beyond individuals to affect communities and families, fuelling a cycle of economic hardship (Adedoyin & Olanrewaju, 2022).

Nigeria's digital economy presents an opportunity for growth and job creation, especially as global reliance on digital technology expands. Key sectors within this economy—such as fintech, e-commerce, digital marketing, and online freelancing—are experiencing rapid growth and attracting both local and foreign investment (PwC, 2021). Nigeria's fintech industry, in particular, is among the most developed in Africa, with leading companies providing financial services to millions. However, despite the digital economy's potential, Nigeria faces major obstacles, including inadequate digital infrastructure, limited internet access in rural areas, and gaps in digital literacy, especially among youth (Akinyemi & Adeoye, 2023). These barriers make it challenging for young Nigerians to engage in digital jobs sustainably, limiting the reach of the digital economy.

This study explores the behavioural drivers that contribute to youth unemployment in Nigeria and examines how these factors impact young people's ability to participate sustainably in the digital economy. While structural issues like inadequate infrastructure and policy gaps are widely recognized,

behavioural factors such as a lack of digital skills, dependence on traditional career paths, and limited entrepreneurial initiative are often overlooked. By focusing on these behavioural dimensions, the study seeks to shed light on the ways in which Nigerian youth can better prepare themselves for digital roles. The aim is to provide insights into how targeted strategies—through education, policy reform, and community support—can help young Nigerians overcome both internal and external barriers to employment in the digital economy. This approach aligns with Nigeria's broader goals of fostering economic development and improving quality of life through enhanced digital participation.

## **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

The concept of behavioural drivers in unemployment explores how individual attitudes, skills, and behaviours impact employability. Several theories provide insight into these behavioural factors. *Human Capital Theory* suggests that individuals' skills, education, and experiences directly influence their ability to secure jobs and earn income. According to this theory, investing in education and skill development increases one's "human capital," improving job prospects and income potential (Becker, 1994). However, in Nigeria, a mismatch between the skills provided by educational institutions and the needs of the digital job market often limits young people's employability (Ogundele & Adebayo, 2021).

*Motivation Theory* further explains how an individual's intrinsic drive to work and achieve influences their job search behaviour and career progression. Theories like Maslow's hierarchy of needs suggest that when people have their basic needs met, they

are motivated to seek jobs that provide a sense of accomplishment and self-actualization (Maslow, 1943). For Nigerian youth, socioeconomic barriers can hinder motivation, especially if they lack access to career guidance or role models in digital fields.

Another relevant concept is *Digital Literacy Frameworks*, which address the growing need for digital skills in today's economy. Digital literacy includes competencies like using technology effectively, navigating digital platforms, and developing digital resilience to adapt to rapid technological changes (UNESCO, 2018). In Nigeria, gaps in digital literacy persist due to limited access to digital education, particularly in rural areas, limiting youths' participation in the digital economy (Ikeji & Akpan, 2022).

### **Sustainable Employment in the Digital Economy**

Sustainable employment in the digital economy refers to employment that is long-lasting, adaptable, and able to withstand changes in technology and market demands. Literature on sustainable digital employment emphasizes the importance of adaptability, skills acquisition, and lifelong learning. *Adaptability*—the ability to adjust to new tools, platforms, and work demands—is essential for success in digital jobs, which evolve rapidly (World Economic Forum, 2020). Sustainable participation in this sector also requires continuous *skills acquisition*, with a focus on digital skills, as well as problem-solving, creativity, and collaboration (ILO, 2021).

*Lifelong learning* is a key component of sustainable employment in the digital economy, as it encourages individuals to continuously upgrade their skills to remain

competitive. This approach is particularly relevant in Nigeria, where formal education often does not keep pace with digital innovations, making self-directed learning a valuable asset for young workers (Alabi & Ibitoye, 2023). Sustainable employment in the digital economy is thus characterized by flexibility and the proactive pursuit of knowledge.

### **Youth Unemployment Studies in Nigeria**

Numerous studies have examined youth unemployment in Nigeria, revealing both structural and behavioural factors behind this crisis. According to Ojo and Ayeni (2020), structural barriers like limited job opportunities and inadequate economic policies significantly affect youth employment. However, a growing body of research highlights behavioural challenges that contribute to youth unemployment, such as low digital skills, inadequate entrepreneurial initiative, and reluctance to explore non-traditional career paths (Eze & Chukwu, 2019).

These studies underline a critical gap in the focus on behavioural aspects, such as young people's lack of digital literacy and adaptability, which are crucial in the digital economy. Previous research largely overlooks the behavioural drivers behind unemployment, such as cultural expectations that encourage traditional jobs or psychological barriers like fear of failure (Nwosu, 2021). Addressing these behavioural gaps could empower Nigerian youth to engage more sustainably with digital job opportunities, creating a more resilient workforce.

### **Key Behavioural Drivers of Youth Unemployment in Nigeria**

1. *Skills Mismatch and Inadequate Digital Skills:* One of the core challenges for Nigerian youth in accessing digital employment opportunities is the mismatch between their skills and the demands of the digital economy. According to the World Bank (2021), many young Nigerians lack the foundational digital skills required for emerging digital roles, from basic coding to digital marketing and data analytics. This skills gap is largely attributed to weaknesses in the formal education system, where digital literacy and employability training are often not prioritized. Instead, many curricula focus on theoretical knowledge, offering little practical or technological skills development. Consequently, Nigerian youth are often unprepared for jobs that require digital competencies, which limits their participation in high-growth sectors like fintech and e-commerce (Adepoju & Eze, 2022).
2. *Mindset and Cultural Expectations:* Cultural attitudes in Nigeria frequently emphasize traditional career paths, such as medicine, law, and government employment, while viewing technology and entrepreneurship with skepticism. This cultural mindset can discourage youth from pursuing riskier, innovation-driven roles in tech fields or digital entrepreneurship. Furthermore, the societal emphasis on job security leads many young people to seek stable but limited public sector roles rather than exploring the uncertainties of digital startups. As a result, even with the growing opportunities in digital sectors, cultural expectations can create barriers to entry, discouraging young Nigerians from taking advantage of them (Nwankwo & Akande, 2020).
3. *Limited Entrepreneurial Initiative:* Low levels of entrepreneurial initiative among Nigerian youth present another barrier to digital employment. Entrepreneurship in the digital sector requires creativity, resilience, and an ability to identify and seize market opportunities. However, many Nigerian youth lack the skills or support systems to foster these attributes. Studies suggest that entrepreneurial development in Nigeria is hindered by inadequate training, limited mentorship, and financial constraints (Afolabi & Lawal, 2023). Without strong entrepreneurial skills and a supportive ecosystem, young people are less likely to venture into tech-driven fields, which limits job creation and self-employment in digital markets.
4. *Resistance to Change and Lack of Adaptability:* Adaptability is crucial in the fast-evolving digital landscape, where new tools, technologies, and job requirements emerge constantly. However, a significant number of Nigerian youths show resistance to change and have limited adaptability, which can hinder their ability to pursue digital employment opportunities. Many young people struggle to learn new digital tools or embrace modern ways of working due to a lack of exposure or limited access to resources. This resistance can make it challenging for them to keep up with industry trends, making them less

- competitive in the job market (Chukwuemeka & Johnson, 2021).
5. *Dependency on Public Sector Employment:* Public sector employment remains a popular career choice in Nigeria, often seen as stable and prestigious. However, this reliance on government jobs can limit youth engagement in the digital economy, as many young people are more inclined to wait for government employment opportunities than to explore entrepreneurial or freelance work in digital sectors. This dependency restricts their exposure to alternative career paths, leading to underutilization of digital talents that could otherwise contribute to Nigeria's tech-driven economy (Ojo, 2022). Without shifting perspectives toward digital entrepreneurship, this dependency may continue to limit youth participation in the digital workforce.
  6. *Psychological Barriers:* Psychological factors, such as low self-efficacy, lack of confidence, and fear of failure, are significant behavioural drivers of youth unemployment in Nigeria. Many young Nigerians face a sense of inadequacy in pursuing digital roles, often doubting their ability to succeed in competitive and constantly evolving fields. Fear of failure can deter young people from venturing into unknown areas, leading them to avoid high-potential digital job opportunities and entrepreneurial ventures. Additionally, a lack of access to mentorship and role models in the digital economy can compound these psychological barriers, reinforcing negative self-perceptions and limiting career aspirations (Okonkwo & Dike, 2023).
  7. *Networking and Social Capital Deficiencies:* Access to professional networks and social capital is essential for securing employment, particularly in digital sectors where networking can lead to job referrals, collaborations, and mentorship opportunities. Unfortunately, many Nigerian youths lack these networks, either due to socioeconomic barriers or limited connections in tech-oriented fields. This social capital deficiency restricts their access to information, resources, and skill-building opportunities that could enhance their employability in the digital economy. The absence of strong networks also limits awareness of available job opportunities and hinders the ability to navigate the competitive job market effectively (Ajayi & Oluwaseun, 2021).

### **Structural Barriers Interacting with Behavioural Drivers**

1. *Limited Digital Infrastructure:* Nigeria's limited digital infrastructure is a significant structural barrier that amplifies behavioural challenges, especially in rural areas where internet access and technological resources are scarce. Poor internet connectivity and high costs prevent many young Nigerians from developing digital skills, reinforcing behavioural limitations such as resistance to new technologies or low digital literacy (Adekoya & Agboola, 2022). This lack of infrastructure also hinders youths' exposure to digital tools and platforms, limiting their adaptability and

discouraging them from exploring careers in tech-driven fields. Inadequate digital infrastructure can therefore exacerbate youths' dependency on traditional employment and dampen their entrepreneurial ambitions, as they face limited access to online resources, training programs, and remote job opportunities (Akinwunmi & Okafor, 2023).

2. *Educational System Gaps:* Nigeria's educational system faces critical challenges in providing students with the practical skills needed for digital employment. The traditional curriculum emphasizes theoretical knowledge, often neglecting the hands-on training essential for digital literacy and tech readiness. As a result, graduates are frequently unprepared for jobs in digital sectors, contributing to the skills mismatch that drives youth unemployment (Eze & Adeyemi, 2021). These gaps in the educational system limit students' exposure to digital competencies, reducing their adaptability and fuelling a mindset that prefers conventional career paths. Without significant reform to integrate digital skills training, Nigerian youths will continue to struggle with both structural and behavioural barriers in the digital job market.
3. *Policy and Regulatory Issues:* Government policies and regulations play a crucial role in shaping the digital economy and employment opportunities for youth. While Nigeria has policies aimed at youth employment and digital economy growth, their implementation is often inconsistent, leaving many young

people without adequate support to engage in digital work. Furthermore, regulatory challenges—such as restrictive policies on internet usage or limitations on fintech and e-commerce operations—can stifle innovation and deter young entrepreneurs from entering the digital space (Olusola & Bello, 2022). Policy gaps also contribute to psychological barriers by creating an uncertain environment that discourages risk-taking and undermines confidence in pursuing digital careers. Addressing these policy and regulatory issues is essential to reduce youth dependency on traditional employment sectors and to promote behavioural engagement in the digital economy.

### **Implications for Sustainable Digital Economy Participation**

1. *Need for Digital Skills Development Programs:* For Nigeria to foster sustainable youth participation in the digital economy, there is a pressing need for nationwide digital skills development programs. Comprehensive digital literacy initiatives that encompass basic and advanced skills are essential to close the skills gap and enhance youth employability in tech-driven sectors. These programs could be incorporated into school curriculums and supported through government and private sector collaborations to provide practical training in areas such as coding, digital marketing, and data analysis. When youths are equipped with relevant digital competencies, they can better adapt to the evolving demands of the digital job market, contributing to

- long-term economic resilience (Akinola & Obi, 2023).
2. *Cultivating Entrepreneurial Mindsets:* Encouraging entrepreneurial mindsets is vital for stimulating job creation and innovation in Nigeria's digital economy. Programs aimed at fostering entrepreneurial thinking and risk-taking can help young people overcome cultural and psychological barriers that often discourage them from pursuing digital ventures. For instance, entrepreneurship training could be introduced in secondary and tertiary education, with a focus on tech-based business development, financial literacy, and risk management. By cultivating these mindsets, Nigerian youth can develop the confidence and creativity needed to start businesses or pursue freelance opportunities, which in turn contributes to economic diversification and reduces reliance on traditional employment (Okeke & Adesina, 2021).
  3. *Promoting Adaptive and Lifelong Learning Attitudes:* In the rapidly changing digital landscape, adaptability and a commitment to lifelong learning are essential. Encouraging Nigerian youth to embrace continuous learning ensures they remain competitive in an economy where technological advancements and market demands evolve quickly. Initiatives such as online courses, upskilling workshops, and certification programs in emerging digital fields (e.g., cybersecurity, artificial intelligence) can provide young people with the tools to continually update their skills. Fostering a mindset of adaptability will not only help individuals navigate changes within their careers but also bolster the country's digital workforce resilience (Ibrahim & Bello, 2022).
  4. *Importance of Social and Professional Networks:* Building social and professional networks is crucial for Nigerian youth aiming to enter and thrive in the digital economy. Networking can improve access to mentorship, job opportunities, and industry insights. Programs that create networking platforms, such as digital job fairs, online mentorship portals, and tech community events, could greatly benefit young people by connecting them with industry professionals and peers. Enhanced social capital can increase youths' awareness of job opportunities, facilitate skills exchange, and support career progression in digital fields (Usman & Okoro, 2022).
  5. *Encouraging Career Diversification:* To reduce reliance on traditional job sectors, Nigerian youth must be encouraged to explore diverse career pathways, including freelance, remote work, and tech-based roles. Initiatives that introduce young people to digital freelancing platforms, remote job resources, and portfolio-building workshops can help broaden their career perspectives. Additionally, promoting career diversification could improve income stability for youths, as many tech-based roles offer flexibility and growth potential. Encouraging career diversification is particularly relevant given the global demand for

remote work, which provides Nigerian youth with opportunities beyond local job markets and promotes sustainable participation in the digital economy (Adeyemi & Olanrewaju, 2021).

## **Recommendations**

To address behavioural barriers and support youth participation in Nigeria's digital economy, targeted policy interventions are essential. The government could create policies that incentivize digital skill acquisition by offering tax breaks to tech firms that provide training programs or internships for youth. Additionally, establishing youth-targeted funding programs can enable young Nigerians to pursue entrepreneurial ventures in digital fields. Policies that reduce data costs and improve access to digital infrastructure, especially in rural areas, would also encourage youth engagement by making digital resources more accessible (Agbaje & Adebajo, 2023).

Reforming the national education curriculum to include digital literacy and essential soft skills is critical for equipping Nigerian youth with the competencies they need in modern job markets. Introducing digital literacy as early as secondary school, alongside training in problem-solving, teamwork, and critical thinking, will help bridge the skills gap. Integrating these skills into formal education can better prepare students for dynamic, tech-driven careers and support a mindset shift toward digital entrepreneurship (Oluwaseun & Okeke, 2022). Additionally, vocational training programs focused on high-demand tech skills could complement traditional academic pathways.

The involvement of the private sector, particularly tech companies, is crucial in bridging the digital skills gap. Partnerships between educational institutions and

technology firms can facilitate real-world learning opportunities through internships, apprenticeships, and practical skills workshops. These partnerships could also allow students to gain experience with industry-standard tools and technologies, enhancing their readiness for digital jobs. Incentives, such as public recognition or subsidies for tech companies involved in these initiatives, would encourage private sector participation and strengthen the educational-to-employment pipeline (Bello & Ibukun, 2021).

Community-driven initiatives can play a vital role in mentoring and motivating youth toward digital careers. Local tech hubs, digital mentorship programs, and community workshops focused on digital entrepreneurship can provide young people with practical skills, guidance, and encouragement. Community leaders, NGOs, and experienced tech professionals could collaborate to create these programs, especially in underserved areas. By fostering a supportive network, community-based initiatives can help youth overcome psychological barriers, cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets, and build essential social capital for the digital economy (Amadi & Ojo, 2023).

## **Conclusion**

This study has highlighted the significant role that behavioural drivers play in shaping youth unemployment in Nigeria. Key behavioural factors—such as skills mismatch, low digital literacy, a preference for traditional career paths, limited entrepreneurial drive, and resistance to new technologies—contribute substantially to youth unemployment in the context of the digital economy. Structural factors, including inadequate digital infrastructure, educational system gaps, and

policy limitations, further reinforce these behavioural challenges, making it difficult for Nigerian youth to fully engage in and benefit from digital employment opportunities. Addressing these drivers requires a multifaceted approach that combines policy support, educational reform, and community-based initiatives to build both the skills and mindsets needed for sustainable participation in the digital economy.

Promoting sustainable employment within Nigeria's digital economy will require not only skills training but also a behaviour-oriented strategy to help youth develop adaptability, entrepreneurial thinking, and a willingness to pursue non-traditional career paths. By focusing on behavioural drivers and actively working to reshape perceptions and attitudes toward digital work, Nigeria can empower its young population to seize opportunities in this fast-growing sector. Supporting Nigerian youth in this way can not only reduce unemployment but also strengthen the nation's digital workforce, fostering long-term economic growth and resilience in an increasingly technology-driven world.

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