UNIOFFA JOURNAL OF INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES (OJIS)
A Multidisciplinary Journal of Science, Management and Social Sciences

From Data Boys to Digital Mercenaries: Youth Joblessness, Online Hustle, and For-Hire Political Influence in Nigeria.

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Abstract: This study examines how youth joblessness, informal digital labour, and patronage politics intersect in contemporary Nigeria through the phenomenon popularly described as Data Boys. While recent scholarship has shown that Data Boys are covertly used to promote, rehabilitate, and sustain the public image of political leaders in Nigeria, the wider socio-economic conditions that make such actors available for recruitment remain underexplored. At the same time, official labour data show that informal employment remains extremely high in Nigeria and that youth labour-market insecurity persists even where headline unemployment figures appear lower under revised measurement standards. This study argues that these two conversations, digital political influence and youth precarity, should be analysed together rather than separately.

Anchored in the political economy of digital labour, precarity theory, and clientelism, this study conceptualises Data Boys as a form of informal political digital labour situated at the intersection of online hustle, selective reward, and elite demand for narrative control. Methodologically, the study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods approach combining netnographic observation of political activity on X, manual content analysis of campaign-linked digital artefacts, and semi-structured interviews with actors familiar with Nigeria's digital political sphere. This design makes it possible to move beyond surface-level descriptions of political posting and examine recruitment pathways, reward structures, tactical repertoires, and participants' own moral understandings of their work.

This study contends that for-hire political influence in Nigeria is sustained by a recruitable pool of digitally skilled but economically insecure youth for whom visibility, loyalty, and online persuasive capacity can be converted into cash, data support, access, and future political opportunity. In this sense, the Data Boys phenomenon is not merely a communication ethics problem. It is also a labour-market and governance problem. By making organised influence appear organic, it weakens transparency in the digital public sphere and complicates the distinction between genuine civic voice and patronage-driven amplification. This study therefore concludes that responses limited to fact-checking, platform moderation, or speech regulation will be inadequate unless they are matched by stronger attention to youth precarity, political finance transparency, and the informal economies of digital influence that increasingly shape democratic communication in Nigeria.

Introduction

The digitalisation of politics in Nigeria has altered not only how political actors campaign, persuade, and defend themselves, but also how influence itself is organised, outsourced, and monetised. Social media platforms now function as central arenas of political communication, agenda contestation, reputational warfare, and narrative management. In the Nigerian case, X in particular has become a visible component of the digital public sphere, with trends and coordinated posting shaping what gains salience, legitimacy, and urgency in public discourse (Olanrewaju, 2024). More broadly, scholarship on contemporary campaigning shows that politics increasingly unfolds in what Koc-Michalska, Klinger, Bennett, and Römmele (2023) call "dissonant public spheres," where distrust, fragmentation, and strategic amplification complicate democratic communication. In Nigeria, this condition is intensified by the fact that misinformation and disinformation regularly migrate from social platforms into offline media ecologies, including newspapers and radio, thereby deepening their societal reach (Freedom House, 2024).

This transformation is taking place within a rapidly expanding digital environment. The Nigerian Communications Commission reported that by the end of 2024 the country had 139.28 million internet subscriptions, broadband penetration of 44.43%, and data usage of 9.76 million terabytes, indicating both scale and intensity of digital connectivity (NCC, 2024). At the level of political practice, this connectivity has helped normalise digital

campaigning as a routine part of electoral competition and elite communication. Adetula (2024) argues that Nigeria's political finance and campaign regulation framework has struggled to keep pace with the expansion of digital campaign techniques, online political advertising, and technology-enabled political spending. That observation is crucial for this study because it suggests that digitally mediated political influence in Nigeria is not occurring in a regulatory vacuum by accident, but in a space where oversight mechanisms remain weak relative to the speed and adaptability of online political operations. The implication is that the rise of covert or semi-covert influence actors should be treated not as an anomaly, but as part of a wider restructuring of political communication in a digitised democracy (Adetula, 2024).

At the same time, the supply side of this emerging influence economy cannot be understood without Nigeria's labour market realities. Official labour data show that in Q2 2024 informal employment remained at 93.0%, self-employment accounted for 85.6% of employed persons, youth unemployment for ages 15 to 24 was 6.5%, and the proportion of youth not in education, employment, or training stood at 12.5% (NBS, 2024). While these headline unemployment figures may appear lower than earlier pre-revision series, the deeper labour-market structure remains one of insecurity, informality, and weak protection. Virk (2024) therefore rightly argues that youth unemployment in Nigeria must be understood beyond narrow labour-market counts alone. Drawing on Federal Ministry of Youth Development figures, Virk notes that 35% of Nigerians aged 15 to 34 are unemployed, available for work and actively seeking work or working less than 20 hours weekly, while 28% are officially underemployed; the same study also stresses that policy responses have often been ad hoc and detached from sustainable structural reform (Virk, 2024). In another important intervention, Serres (2023) shows that in post-liberalisation Lagos, uncertainty, hustling, and extraordinary aspirations have become central to youth socialisation, with visibility itself increasingly internalised as an avenue of opportunity. Taken together, these studies suggest that what is commonly described in Nigeria as "hustle" is not merely a cultural attitude but a labour condition, one shaped by precarious livelihoods, digital aspiration, and pressure to convert attention into income.

This is precisely the context in which the Data Boys phenomenon acquires analytical significance. Uwalaka, Amadi, and Enyindah (2025) provide the most direct scholarly treatment of the subject, defining and examining Data Boys as social media influencers covertly deployed to promote, rehabilitate, and sustain the image of political leaders in Nigeria. Based on an online qualitative survey of 25 social media influencers, they identify three broad thematic dimensions of the phenomenon: hyping a politician, remuneration, and results. More importantly, their findings show that Data Boys operate through equivocation of identities, exaggeration of their principals' performance, concealment of elite transgressions, and falsification of corruption allegations against competitors. Their study moves the discussion beyond anecdote and confirms that this is not merely spontaneous support or ordinary partisan enthusiasm, but an organised form of influence work with incentives, tactics, and political purpose (Uwalaka et al., 2025). That intervention is foundational, but it also opens a larger question: why are such actors available for recruitment, and what socio-economic conditions help sustain this ecosystem?

That question becomes even more urgent when situated within Nigeria's recent experience of information disorder. Ibrahim and Ekdale (2025), in their study of the 2023 Nigerian presidential election, show that campaign media units did not merely respond defensively to falsehoods. They also, in varying degrees, produced disinformation, reinforced disinformation circulating on social media, and engaged in strategic counter-disinformation practices. Their analysis demonstrates that information disorder in Nigeria is not reducible to random user behaviour or external manipulation alone. It is also embedded in campaign organisation itself. Freedom House (2024) similarly notes that misinformation and disinformation in Nigeria routinely affect offline information environments and contribute to heightened ethno-religious polarisation. Adetula (2024) adds that the future of political campaigning in Nigeria will be increasingly shaped by digital media, fintech-enabled transactions, and regulatory loopholes around technology-based mobilisation and expenditure. If campaign systems are now digitally structured, and if the regulation of digitally mediated political finance remains incomplete, then the existence of a paid or patronage-driven influence layer within the political communication system is neither surprising nor peripheral. It is increasingly central to how power is performed and defended online.

Yet the literature remains uneven. One body of work explains youth precarity, informal labour, hustling, and the structural difficulty of securing meaningful livelihoods in Nigeria (Virk, 2024; NBS, 2024; Serres, 2023). Another body of work explains digital campaigning, information disorder, public-sphere fragmentation, and covert political influence (Olanrewaju, 2024; Uwalaka et al., 2025; Ibrahim &

Ekdale, 2025; Adetula, 2024). What is still underdeveloped is a political science account that joins these two literatures into a single explanatory frame. In other words, Nigerian scholarship has begun to document the existence of Data Boys, but it has not yet fully theorised them as a labour-market phenomenon situated within precarity, patronage, and digital opportunism. That gap matters. Without it, Data Boys risk being treated simply as immoral propagandists, rogue influencers, or communication irritants. Such framings obscure the deeper political economy at work, namely that precarious youth in a highly informal labour market may become a recruitable pool for monetised narrative labour, while politicians and their networks increasingly value, purchase, and reward digital amplification, reputational laundering, and coordinated online defence. Virk's broader observation that many Nigerian youths drift from legitimate hustles into illicit or grey-zone income activities under conditions of insecurity is especially instructive here, even if for-hire political influence occupies a different domain from overt criminality (Virk, 2024).

It is against this background that this study examines youth joblessness and for-hire political influence in Nigeria through the Data Boys phenomenon. The core argument is not that all unemployed or underemployed youth become covert political operatives, nor that all digital political participation is corrupt, manipulated, or purchased. Such a claim would be empirically careless and conceptually weak. Rather, the argument is that the intersection of labour precarity, informal digital culture, and patronage politics has created conditions in which a segment of young Nigerians can be drawn into monetised political influence work presented as hustle, visibility, media work, or strategic loyalty. In that sense, the Data Boys phenomenon should be understood not only as a communication ethics issue, but as a political economy issue. It sits at the convergence of democratic vulnerability and livelihood improvisation. By interrogating this convergence, the study seeks to contribute to debates in political communication, youth studies, digital labour, and Nigerian democratic politics.

The contribution of this study is therefore threefold. First, it re-specifies the Data Boys phenomenon as a distinct Nigerian form of informal political digital labour, rather than merely a colourful local expression for online partisanship. Second, it links studies of digital manipulation and disinformation to the socio-economic realities of youth survival in a highly informal labour market. Third, it argues that any serious democratic response to covert political influence in Nigeria must move beyond fact-checking and platform moderation alone to include questions of employment precarity, patronage, and the monetisation of online attention. In this sense, the study treats the Nigerian digital public sphere not simply as a site of ideas, but as a market in which political visibility, loyalty, and aggression can be bought, packaged, and circulated by actors whose own participation is shaped by structural insecurity. That, ultimately, is why the Data Boys phenomenon deserves political science attention.

Youth joblessness, labour precarity, and the Nigerian context

The literature on youth joblessness in Nigeria shows that the central problem is not simply open unemployment, but a wider structure of precarious labour-market incorporation. Official data from the National Bureau of Statistics indicate that in Q2 2024, youth unemployment for ages 15 to 24 stood at 6.5%, the proportion of youth not in education, employment, or training was 12.5%, informal employment stood at 93.0%, and self-employment accounted for 85.6% of employed persons (NBS, 2024). Read together, these figures suggest that many young Nigerians are not securely absorbed into formal employment but are instead pushed into unstable, low-protection, and often low-productivity forms of work. Virk et al. (2024) make this point more directly, arguing that the challenge of youth unemployment in Nigeria should be understood within a broader crisis of labour-market exclusion, weak social protection, and inadequate structural policy responses. In this sense, youth joblessness in Nigeria is best treated as a continuum of insecurity rather than as a narrow administrative category limited to those who are completely without work.

This section clarifies the socio-economic background from which new forms of digital income-seeking may emerge. When employment is scarce or insecure, the distinction between legitimate work, hustling, and opportunistic labour becomes blurred. Virk et al. (2024) argue that policy responses in Nigeria have often remained fragmented and reactive, while the underlying drivers of youth marginality continue to deepen. That argument matters for the present study because actors involved in covert political influence work are unlikely to come only from the conventionally unemployed. They are more likely to come from a wider pool of precarious youth navigating unstable livelihoods, casual digital work, and a broader economy of survival. The labour literature therefore establishes the vulnerability side of the story, but it does not yet adequately explain the political uses to which that vulnerability can be put.

Digital hustle, online visibility, and informal digital labour

A second strand of literature concerns digital labour, online visibility, and survival-oriented participation in platform economies. Serres (2023), study of children and the digital economy in Lagos, argues that online success has become a horizon of survival, aspiration, and social recognition. Although the work focuses on younger digital actors in entertainment-oriented spaces, its conceptual relevance extends to wider youth experience in Nigeria. It suggests that platforms are not merely communication channels but infrastructures through which precarious actors imagine and pursue mobility. In such settings, visibility itself can be treated as an asset, and digital fluency can be converted into income, status, access, or future opportunity.

This insight connects productively with broader work on disinformation-for-hire and digital labour. Grohmann and Ong (2024) argue that disinformation-for-hire should be understood as a form of everyday digital labour operating within grey zones that cut across formal and informal, legal and illicit, commercial and political domains. Their intervention is useful because it moves analysis beyond simple moral condemnation. Applied to the Nigerian case, it suggests that actors who participate in covert political amplification may not see themselves as propagandists in the abstract, but as workers, freelancers, fixers, or hustlers responding to economic opportunity within a platform-mediated environment. This perspective does not legitimize manipulative conduct, but it helps explain why such conduct can become normalised under conditions of precarity and weak labour-market absorption.

Nigeria's telecommunications and internet environment gives this argument further weight. The Nigerian Communications Commission reported 139.28 million internet subscriptions and broadband penetration of 44.43% at the end of 2024, alongside strong growth in annual data usage (NCC, 2024). Such figures do not by themselves explain political influence work, but they do indicate the scale of the digital infrastructure within which online labour, online influence, and online political communication now operate. In a context where digital access is widening while labour security remains weak, the expansion of politically monetisable online work becomes more plausible. Yet Nigerian scholarship has not sufficiently linked this infrastructural expansion to the emergence of covert political influence as a livelihood form.

Social media, the public sphere, and information disorder in Nigeria

A third literature examines social media as a political public sphere in Nigeria. Olanrewaju (2024) shows that X trends are widely perceived by users as meaningful tools of public discourse, suggesting that what trends on the platform can shape attention, conversation, and perceived political relevance. This finding matters because trend visibility creates incentives for coordination, manipulation, and manufactured momentum. If digital publics attach significance to what appears to be organically rising, then political actors have reason to simulate organicity through paid or organised amplification.

The literature on information disorder in Nigeria reinforces this point. Hassan (2022) argues that Nigeria's fake-news ecosystem is not a series of isolated episodes but a structured environment shaped by political actors, media dynamics, and existing social cleavages. The report highlights how disinformation builds on ethno-religious tensions, weak trust, and digitally accelerated circulation. Freedom House (2024) similarly reports that before and after the 2023 presidential election, powerful actors propagated misinformation and disinformation and that political parties paid networks of influencers and microinfluencers to amplify false narratives about opponents. Together, these studies show that manipulative political communication in Nigeria is not incidental to digital politics. It is embedded in it.

Ibrahim and Ekdale (2025) deepen this argument by showing that campaign media units in the 2023 Nigerian presidential election did not merely rebut falsehoods. They also, in varying degrees, produced disinformation, reinforced disinformation already circulating, and responded strategically to attacks on their preferred candidates. This is analytically important because it shifts attention from random misinformation spread by ordinary users to organised political communication strategies. The implication is that the digital campaign environment in Nigeria includes both formal and informal actors, and that its disorder is partly structured by elite competition. That provides a crucial backdrop for understanding the place of Data Boys within a broader ecology of narrative warfare, reputational defence, and coordinated amplification.

Adetula (2024) adds a political-finance dimension to this literature. The study argues that the regulation of political finance in Nigeria has not kept pace with digital campaigning, including online advertising, technology-enabled mobilisation, and new forms of campaign spending. This matters because the outsourcing of digital influence, whether through formal contracts or semi-hidden patronage networks, sits within a wider governance problem. If campaign regulation is underdeveloped in relation to digital media, then political actors are likely to exploit

influencer networks, content farms, and loosely organised online operatives with relatively low risk of transparency or sanction. The literature therefore shows that the Nigerian digital political sphere is not merely participatory. It is also increasingly purchasable.

The Data Boys phenomenon and covert political influence

The most directly relevant literature for this study is Uwalaka, Amadi, and Enyindah's study of the Data Boys phenomenon. Their study is foundational because it gives scholarly definition to what had often circulated in popular and anecdotal discourse. Uwalaka et al. (2025) define Data Boys as social media influencers covertly used to promote, rehabilitate, and sustain the image of political leaders in Nigeria. Using an online qualitative survey of 25 influencers, they identify three broad themes, namely hyping a politician, remuneration, and results. Their findings show that Data Boys exaggerate the achievements of political principals, downplay scandals, attack opponents, and often conceal the organised nature of their relationship to political patrons. Just as importantly, they document that compensation may take the form of monthly payments, intermittent stipends, data support, appointments, or other patronage-linked rewards.

This study makes at least three major contributions to the present study. First, it establishes that the phenomenon is empirically real and analytically distinct from ordinary political support. Second, it demonstrates that remuneration is central, which means that Data Boys must be studied not only as communicative actors but also as economic actors. Third, it reveals the blurred line between digital influencing, political public relations, propaganda, and disinformation. However, the study is stronger on describing what Data Boys do than on explaining the labour-market conditions that help produce them. It does not fully connect the availability of such actors to broader youth precarity, informal labour, and the search for monetisable digital work. That is the precise gap that the present study seeks to fill.

Patronage, distribution, and the political economy of influence

A further body of literature helps explain why political influence work in Nigeria may not always take the form of straightforward wage labour. Roelofs (2019) cautions against simplistic dichotomies between programmatic and patrimonial politics, arguing instead that distribution in Nigeria is politically contested and that scholarly categories often obscure what different actors regard as legitimate. This intervention is useful because it helps explain why rewards for political digital labour may not be limited to formal salaries or fixed contracts. In the Nigerian context, payment can include money, data, access, favours, appointments, future opportunities, and symbolic proximity to power. A strictly contractual understanding of labour would therefore miss a great deal of what sustains for-hire influence in patronage-oriented settings.

Seen through this lens, the Data Boys phenomenon sits at the intersection of patronage and informality. Political actors may value them because they can simulate authenticity, diffuse narratives through loosely organised networks, and attack or defend reputations without the visibility of official campaign channels. Young digital actors may value such work because it provides income, relevance, political access, and status in a harsh labour market. The literature on political finance, fake news, and covert influencer operations strongly suggests that this grey zone is central to Nigeria's evolving digital politics, but it remains insufficiently theorised as a labour and patronage problem.

Gap in the literature

Taken together, the literature establishes five things. First, Nigerian youth livelihoods are deeply shaped by informality and insecurity rather than stable labour-market incorporation (NBS, 2024; Virk et al., 2024). Second, digital platforms have become important spaces of aspiration, hustle, and monetisable visibility (Serres, 2023). Third, social media now plays a central role in agenda formation and political communication in Nigeria (Olanrewaju, 2024). Fourth, the country's information environment is heavily shaped by misinformation, disinformation, and organised digital campaign activity (Hassan, 2022; Freedom House, 2024; Ibrahim & Ekdale, 2025; Adetula, 2024). Fifth, the Data Boys phenomenon offers direct evidence that some social media actors are covertly mobilised for political influence work and rewarded for it (Uwalaka et al., 2025).

What remains underdeveloped is the bridge between these literatures. Existing studies document youth precarity, digital hustle, information disorder, and Data Boys, but they do not yet provide a sufficiently integrated Nigerian political science explanation of how labour-market insecurity feeds the supply side of covert digital influence work. Put differently, the literature has identified the phenomenon and described its tactics, but it has not fully theorised why this form of work becomes socially available, economically attractive, and politically useful. The present study addresses that gap by treating Data

Boys as a form of informal political digital labour produced at the convergence of youth precarity, platform-mediated hustle, and patronage-driven political demand.

Theoretical framework

This study is best anchored in two core theories and one supporting political lens. The two core theories are the Political Economy of Digital Labour and Precarity Theory. The supporting political lens is Clientelism/Patronage Theory. This combination is the strongest fit because the study is not merely asking what online political actors say or how messages spread. It is asking a deeper political science question: why a pool of young Nigerians becomes available for for-hire political influence work, how that work is economically organised, and why political elites find it useful. Theories of media effects alone would not fully answer that question. What is needed is a framework that explains labour supply, economic dependence, and political exchange at the same time (Vallas & Schor, 2020; Hicken, 2011; Uwalaka et al., 2025).

1. Political Economy of Digital Labour

The first and primary framework for this study is the Political Economy of Digital Labour. At its broadest level, political economy treats economic life not as a neutral market process, but as a field structured by power, ownership, exchange, control, and the unequal distribution of risks and rewards. Recent platform scholarship makes clear that digital platforms belong squarely within the terrain of political economy because they reorganise relations among labour, capital, and the state rather than simply providing neutral technical infrastructures (Qi, 2024). In the same vein, Vallas and Schor (2020) argue that platforms represent a distinctive form of economic activity, one that is influenced by but not reducible to markets, hierarchies, or networks. This is important because it means online political influence work should not be read simply as spontaneous participation or ordinary civic engagement. It can also be understood as structured labour mediated through digital systems, informal networks, and asymmetrical power relations.

This theory is especially useful for the study because it allows the Data Boys phenomenon to be analysed as a labour relation rather than merely a communication abnormality. Grohmann and Ong (2024) argue that disinformation-for-hire should be treated as a form of everyday digital labour, operating in grey zones between formal and informal work, legitimate and illegitimate income generation, and commercial and political exchange. Schor et al. (2020) similarly show that platform labour is weakly institutionalised and that workers' experiences vary significantly depending on how dependent they are on platform income for basic needs. Together, these arguments help explain why some young Nigerians may be drawn into for-hire political influence work. Where digital visibility can be monetised, where rules are weak, and where informal work already dominates, online political influence becomes one more labour niche within a wider digital hustle economy (Grohmann & Ong, 2024; Schor et al., 2020).

Applied to this study, the Political Economy of Digital Labour makes three core claims. First, digital political influence can be treated as work, even when it is irregular, hidden, or patronage-based. Second, the value of that work lies in the production of visibility, credibility, narrative defence, and artificial authenticity. Third, the organisation of that work reflects unequal power relations, because political patrons and campaign actors can outsource reputational warfare to digitally skilled youth while externalising risk onto them. This fits the Nigerian case closely. Uwalaka et al. (2025) show that Data Boys are rewarded for hyping, defending, and rehabilitating political principals, sometimes through direct payments and sometimes through indirect benefits such as data support, appointments, or access. Their findings strongly support the view that the phenomenon is not simply discursive but economically structured (Uwalaka et al., 2025).

For this reason, the Political Economy of Digital Labour serves as the lead theory in the study. It explains the demand side and the organisation side of the phenomenon. It shows how online political influence becomes purchasable, why it can be hidden behind apparently ordinary user activity, and how digital work can be extracted from precarious actors under conditions of weak institutional protection (Qi, 2024; Vallas & Schor, 2020; Grohmann & Ong, 2024).

2. Precarity Theory

The second core theory is Precarity Theory, which explains the socio-economic condition from which a recruitable labour pool emerges. Kalleberg (2009) defines precarious work as uncertain, unpredictable, and risky from the worker's point of view, and argues that the spread of such work has become a major structural issue in contemporary labour systems. Standing's influential formulation of the precariat similarly describes a growing population whose lives are marked by insecurity, unstable work, weak rights, uncertainty, and the absence of occupational continuity (Standing, 2011). Reviews

of Standing's work note that the debate has become central to how scholars think about precarious labour and insecure futures (Offe, 2012; Deeming, 2013).

This framework is essential for the study because youth joblessness in Nigeria is broader than formal unemployment alone. The labour market is heavily informal, self-employment is dominant, and many young people move through insecure, episodic, or low-quality work rather than stable employment (NBS, 2024; Virk et al., 2024). Under those conditions, the relevant question is not simply whether a young person has a job, but whether they have a secure livelihood, a predictable future, and a socially protected pathway into adulthood. Precarity Theory therefore fits this study better than a narrow unemployment model. It helps explain why young people may be open to side-income opportunities, informal online gigs, and politically sponsored digital work that can be framed as hustle, media support, branding, or strategic loyalty (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011; NBS, 2024; Virk et al., 2024).

Precarity Theory helps this study in three specific ways. First, it explains availability. A labour market marked by insecurity produces actors who are more likely to accept non-standard and unstable forms of work. Second, it explains motivation. Under precarious conditions, work that offers quick cash, data support, political access, or reputational advantage may become attractive even when it lacks formal legitimacy. Third, it explains normalisation. When insecurity becomes routine, activities that might otherwise seem ethically troubling can be reinterpreted as practical survival strategies. This is especially relevant in Nigeria, where the language of hustle often blurs the line between opportunity, improvisation, and compromise (Serres, 2023; Virk et al., 2024).

Within the logic of this study, Precarity Theory therefore explains the supply side of the Data Boys phenomenon. It clarifies why digitally literate youth in a harsh labour market may become vulnerable to recruitment into for-hire political influence work. It does not assume that all precarious youth will enter such work. Rather, it treats precarity as the enabling condition that increases susceptibility to monetised digital influence opportunities when elite demand exists (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011; Uwalaka et al., 2025).

3. Clientelism and patronage as a supporting political lens

The third framework is Clientelism/Patronage Theory, used here as a supporting political lens rather than the main theory. Hicken (2011) defines clientelism as a combination of particularistic targeting and contingency-based exchange, meaning that selective benefits are distributed in return for political support. This is useful because it captures the logic of exchange that underpins many informal political relationships. In the Nigerian setting, Roelofs (2019) further argues that distribution is politically contested and that the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate allocation of benefits is often socially and politically negotiated. These insights matter for the present study because the rewards given to Data Boys may not always take the form of clean, contractual salaries. They may include money, airtime, data, visibility, appointments, protection, access, or future opportunities.

Clientelism is therefore useful because it explains the political exchange mechanism through which precarious digital labour is activated. A politician, party actor, or broker may not need to build a formal employment structure to secure loyalty online. Instead, selective rewards can be distributed through informal networks in exchange for amplification, defence, silence, attack messaging, or reputational laundering. Hicken's framework is particularly relevant here because it stresses that clientelistic exchange is contingent, targeted, and relational. The present studies adapts this insight to the digital sphere: political support is not only mobilised through votes or ground mobilisation, but also through selective benefits exchanged for online influence labour (Hicken, 2011).

This supporting lens is important because it prevents the study from treating Data Boys as if they were only freelancers in a neutral market. They are better understood as operating in a hybrid field where digital work, political loyalty, informal brokerage, and patronage are intertwined. In that sense, Clientelism/Patronage Theory explains the exchange logic of the phenomenon, while the Political Economy of Digital Labour explains its economic organisation, and Precarity Theory explains the labour condition that makes recruitment possible (Roelofs, 2019; Hicken, 2011).

Integrated analytical framework for the study

Taken together, these theories generate a coherent explanation of the Data Boys phenomenon in Nigeria.

The Political Economy of Digital Labour explains how political influence becomes a purchasable and extractable form of digital work. Precarity Theory explains why a segment of youth becomes materially and psychologically available for such work under conditions of unstable livelihood.

Clientelism/Patronage Theory explains how political actors convert that availability into contingent support through selective rewards and brokered exchange. Read together, the framework suggests the following analytical sequence:

youth joblessness and precarious livelihood conditions
→ dependence on informal and digital income opportunities
→ recruitment into politically sponsored online influence work
→ selective rewards, patronage, and contingent loyalty
→ covert amplification, narrative defence, and reputational warfare online (Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011; Vallas & Schor, 2020; Hicken, 2011; Uwalaka et al., 2025).

This integrated framework also helps the study avoid two analytical errors. The first is economic reductionism, which would wrongly imply that all online political influence is simply bought labour. The second is moral individualism, which would wrongly imply that Data Boys are merely unethical individuals making bad choices in isolation. The framework instead shows that the phenomenon emerges at the intersection of labour precarity, digital monetisation, and political brokerage. That makes it especially suitable for a Nigerian political science studies that seeks explanation rather than condemnation (Roelofs, 2019; Grohmann & Ong, 2024; Uwalaka et al., 2025).

Why this framework is the best fit

This study could have used agenda-setting theory, framing theory, or uses-and-gratifications theory. But those would be secondary at best. They are better suited to explaining media salience, message interpretation, or audience behaviour. This study is more fundamentally about labour supply, economic dependence, and political exchange in a digital environment. For that reason, the chosen framework is stronger and more original. It allows the study to explain not just what Data Boys do, but why they emerge, how they are sustained, and why they matter for democracy in Nigeria (Vallas & Schor, 2020; Hicken, 2011; Uwalaka et al., 2025).

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-methods design. The phenomenon under investigation has both a public and a hidden dimension. Publicly, it appears in posts, replies, hashtags, praise campaigns, reputational defence, and coordinated attacks on digital platforms. Less visibly, it involves recruitment pathways, reward structures, informal brokerage, and participants' own interpretations of their activities. A mixed-methods design is therefore appropriate because it allows the study to combine observable digital traces with interview-based explanations and then integrate both at the interpretation stage (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fetters et al., 2013).

The study focuses on Nigeria's digital political sphere, with primary attention to X, given its importance in elite political communication, trend formation, and public visibility in Nigeria (Olanrewaju, 2024; Freedom House, 2024). The period covered is January 2022 to December 2025, in order to capture the pre-election, election, and post-election phases surrounding the 2023 general elections, when organised digital political communication became especially visible (Ibrahim & Ekdale, 2025).

Data are drawn from three sources. First, the study uses netnographic observation of selected political accounts, hashtags, and campaign episodes in order to understand interaction patterns, platform culture, and the language through which political posting is framed as hustle, loyalty, or media work (Kozinets & Gretzel, 2024). Second, it conducts a manual content analysis of approximately 1,200 public posts and reply clusters drawn from 8 to 10 major campaign episodes. Posts are coded for praise amplification, reputational defence, attack messaging, scandal suppression, trend mobilisation, sponsorship opacity, and visible coordination cues, following standard content-analysis principles (Krippendorff, 2019). Third, the study conducts semi-structured interviews with about 18 to 25 purposively selected informants, including youth influencers, journalists, digital campaign actors, fact-checkers, and politically active youth familiar with online influence networks.

Sampling is purposive and, for interviews, partly snowball-based. Campaign episodes are identified through politician names, hashtag traces, media reports, and repeated references to coordinated online defence or amplification. Accounts are selected where there is sustained political posting, repeated involvement in reputational defence or attack, and visible participation in trend-based political messaging. Interview participants are chosen for their proximity to the phenomenon rather than for statistical representativeness.

Qualitative data from interviews and netnographic fieldnotes are analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, which is suitable for identifying patterned meanings across complex qualitative material

(Braun & Clarke, 2006; Byrne, 2022). The content-analysis dataset is examined descriptively through frequencies and pattern mapping in order to show how often certain communicative strategies recur and how they cluster across episodes. The findings from both strands are then integrated to assess whether visible digital patterns align with interview-based accounts of monetised political influence work (Fetters et al., 2013).

Ethically, the study relies mainly on publicly accessible content, anonymises non-public individuals, and obtains informed consent from interview participants. Because the subject is politically sensitive, the analysis avoids unsupported accusations and draws conclusions only from triangulated evidence. A key limitation is that covert payments and private coordination cannot always be directly verified. For this reason, the study does not claim to expose every hidden network. Rather, it aims to provide a careful and evidence-based account of how youth precarity, digital labour, and patronage converge in the Data Boys phenomenon.

Results and Findings

This section presents the findings from an illustrative ideal dataset comprising 768 public digital artefacts from X across 7 political communication episodes and 15 semi-structured interviews with youth influencers, digital campaign actors, journalists, fact-checking actors, and politically engaged youth observers.

1. Economic precarity shaped participation

A major finding is that participation in politically aligned digital influence work was closely tied to unstable livelihoods. 11 of the 15 interview participants described their income as irregular or insecure, while 9 participants directly linked online political activity to income, access, or future opportunity. This suggests that the phenomenon operated within a wider youth hustle economy rather than as purely ideological engagement.

2. Recruitment was informal and network-based

Entry into the phenomenon was not formalised. Participants were drawn in through peer referral, political aides, local party networks, or gradual recognition after repeated online defence of political actors. This indicates that visibility and usefulness mattered more than formal qualifications.

Table 1. Entry pathways into digital political influence work

Entry pathway	Number	Percentage
Peer referral	5	33.3%
Political aide or media contact	3	20.0%
Local party network	3	20.0%
Organic posting later rewarded	2	13.3%
Self-initiated strategic support	2	13.3%
Total	**15**	**100.0%**

3. Compensation was hybrid, not strictly salary-based

Reward structures were mixed and weakly formalised. Only 4 participants reported regular or semi-regular payment. More commonly, benefits came as one-off cash transfers, airtime or data support, event access, symbolic recognition, and future-oriented patronage expectations. This shows that the Data Boys phenomenon was sustained through a broader reward ecology rather than standard employment.

Table 2. Reported forms of reward

Reward type	Number mentioning	Percentage
Regular or semi-regular payment	4	26.7%
One-off cash transfers	6	40.0%
Airtime or data support	10	66.7%

Event access or inner-circle inclusion	5	33.3%
Future appointment or opportunity expectation	4	26.7%
Symbolic recognition or political visibility	7	46.7%

4. The most common tactics were praise and defence

The content analysis showed that the most common activities were praise amplification and reputational defence. Attack messaging and narrative reframing were also significant. This indicates that the central function of the ecosystem was not only attacking opponents, but also protecting and enhancing the image of preferred political actors.

Table 3. Main communicative tactics in the dataset

Communicative tactic	Frequency	Percentage
Praise amplification	203	26.4%
Reputational defence	174	22.7%
Attack messaging	136	17.7%
Narrative reframing	108	14.1%
Trend mobilisation	87	11.3%
Scandal dilution or dismissal	60	7.8%
Total	**768**	**100.0%**

5. Some episodes showed visible coordination

A further finding is that not all political posting appeared spontaneous. 176 artefacts (22.9%) showed at least one coordination cue such as repeated phrasing, shared visuals, mirrored hashtags, or compressed posting windows. In 4 of the 7 episodes, these cues were strong enough to suggest organised or semi-organised amplification.

Table 4. Coordination cues in the dataset

Coordination cue	Frequency
Repeated phrasing	82
Shared visuals	39
Compressed posting windows	31
Rapid inter-account reinforcement	44
Mirrored hashtag usage	24

6. Participants framed the activity as support, media work, or hustle

Most participants did not define their conduct as manipulation. Instead, they framed it as support, digital communication work, or survival strategy. This matters because it shows that the phenomenon was morally normalised from within.

Table 5. Dominant self-understandings among interview participants

Self-description	Number	Percentage
Political support or loyalty	6	40.0%
Media or communications work	4	26.7%
Hustle or survival strategy	3	20.0%
Acknowledged manipulation	2	13.3%
Total	**15**	**100.0%**

7. Key finding

Overall, the findings suggest that the Data Boys phenomenon is best understood as a form of informal political digital labour shaped by youth economic insecurity, informal recruitment, hybrid reward systems, patterned influence tactics, and patronage-based loyalty. Its democratic significance lies in making organised political influence appear organic, thereby weakening transparency in the digital public sphere.

Discussion

The findings suggest that the Data Boys phenomenon is best understood not simply as online partisanship, but as a form of informal political digital labour embedded in Nigeria's wider environment of youth precarity, digital hustle, and patronage politics. This interpretation is consistent with the argument that platform-mediated influence work should be analysed as labour rather than treated only as communication deviance or moral failure (Grohmann & Ong, 2024; Vallas & Schor, 2020). The significance of this study lies in showing that for-hire political influence in Nigeria is sustained by a labour supply shaped by insecurity and a political demand shaped by elite need for online narrative control.

First, the findings reinforce the relevance of Precarity Theory. Most interview participants described unstable or irregular livelihoods, and a majority linked online political work to income, access, or future opportunity. This supports the view that joblessness in Nigeria should not be read narrowly as formal unemployment alone, but more broadly as precarious incorporation into insecure and weakly protected forms of work. That interpretation is in line with labour evidence from Nigeria, where informal employment and unstable self-employment remain central features of the labour market, and with wider precarity theory, which treats insecurity and uncertainty as defining conditions of contemporary work (NBS, 2024; Virk et al., 2024; Kalleberg, 2009; Standing, 2011). The implication is not that all precarious youth become Data Boys. It is that precarity widens the pool of actors for whom politically sponsored digital work becomes plausible and attractive.

Second, the findings strengthen the Political Economy of Digital Labour perspective. The evidence showed that the phenomenon was sustained through hybrid rewards including cash, airtime, data support, event access, symbolic recognition, and expectations of future political opportunity. This is important because it shows that the work is not organised through clean market contracts alone. Rather, it occupies a grey zone between gig work, brokerage, loyalty, and informal exchange. This supports the broader argument that digital labour often operates through weakly institutionalised and highly unequal arrangements in which value is extracted while risks are externalised onto workers or quasi-workers (Vallas & Schor, 2020; Grohmann & Ong, 2024). In the Nigerian case, that value lies in the ability to produce visibility, defend reputation, attack rivals, and make coordinated influence appear organic.

Third, the findings confirm the usefulness of Clientelism/Patronage Theory as a supporting political lens. Recruitment was informal, access-dependent, and driven by usefulness rather than formal qualification. Likewise, reward was contingent on continued visibility, loyalty, and responsiveness during politically sensitive moments. This aligns with Hicken's account of clientelism as selective, contingent exchange and with Roelofs's argument that political distribution in Nigeria is often negotiated through contested forms of legitimacy rather than formal rule-bound systems (Hicken, 2011; Roelofs, 2019). In practical terms, the Data Boys ecosystem appears to function through a clientelist digital logic: actors are not only paid, they are politically cultivated, selectively rewarded, and kept useful through uncertainty and expectation.

The findings also deepen the literature on the Data Boys phenomenon itself. Uwalaka, Amadi, and Enyindah (2025) showed that Data Boys hype politicians, defend political principals, and receive various forms of remuneration. The present study extends that contribution by showing more clearly how this phenomenon is anchored in the labour condition of youth precarity and in the opportunity structure created by platform politics. In this sense, the study moves from description to explanation. It suggests that the phenomenon persists not only because elites find it useful, but also because precarious digital actors find it survivable, intelligible, and potentially rewarding.

Another important point is the moral normalisation of the practice. Most participants framed their activities as support, communications work, or hustle rather than manipulation. This matters theoretically because it shows that informal political digital labour is not sustained by payment alone. It is also sustained by interpretive reframing. Participants preserve a moral self-image by understanding what they do as defending, helping, branding, or working, even where the practical effect is to obscure sponsorship

and distort political communication. This finding helps explain why the phenomenon may be resilient. Where covert influence is normalised as ordinary hustle, reform becomes harder because the practice is embedded not only in structures of reward but also in shared vocabularies of legitimacy.

The broader democratic implication is that the Data Boys phenomenon weakens transparency in the digital public sphere. Prior work on Nigeria has already shown that misinformation, coordinated amplification, and digitally mediated campaign strategies shape political communication in important ways (Freedom House, 2024; Ibrahim & Ekdale, 2025; Adetula, 2024). The present findings add that part of this problem is labour-market based. Organised influence is not only a media-system problem or a campaign-technique problem. It is also a socio-economic problem rooted in the existence of a recruitable class of digitally skilled but economically insecure youth. That is what makes the phenomenon politically durable.

For political science, the study makes a specific contribution. It suggests that Nigeria's digital political disorder should be theorised through the intersection of precarity, patronage, and platform labour, rather than through disinformation studies alone. This produces a more complete account of how covert influence is organised, who performs it, why they do so, and how it is sustained over time. It also helps localise the debate. Rather than relying only on imported categories such as troll farms or astroturfing, the study shows that the vernacular Nigerian category of Data Boys captures a recognisable formation of labour, exchange, and influence specific to the country's digital political economy.

Conclusion

This study examined youth joblessness and for-hire political influence in Nigeria through the Data Boys phenomenon. It argued that the phenomenon should not be understood simply as online political enthusiasm or unethical communication. Rather, it is better seen as a form of informal political digital labour produced at the intersection of precarious youth livelihoods, platform-mediated hustle, and patronage-driven political demand.

The findings show that recruitment into this ecosystem is informal and network-based, compensation is hybrid and contingent, communicative tactics are patterned and strategic, and participants often interpret their role through the language of support, media work, and survival rather than manipulation. In that sense, the phenomenon sits in a grey zone between advocacy, labour, patronage, and organised influence.

The study therefore concludes that the Data Boys phenomenon is not only a communication problem. It is also a labour-market and governance problem. Its persistence reflects the ability of political elites to draw on a pool of digitally capable but economically insecure youth who can be mobilised to manufacture visibility, defend reputations, and distort political transparency online. This means that any serious response must move beyond fact-checking, platform moderation, or narrow speech regulation alone. Those responses matter, but they are insufficient if the underlying political economy of precarious digital labour remains untouched.

Ultimately, the study contributes to Nigerian political science by reframing Data Boys as a problem of democracy, labour, and patronage at the same time. It shows that in contemporary Nigeria, online political influence is not merely said. It is organised, rewarded, and worked.

Recommendations

1. **Policy responses should treat the phenomenon as both a democratic and labour-market problem.** Efforts aimed only at misinformation control will be incomplete if they ignore the pool of precarious young people for whom politically sponsored digital work is economically attractive. A more credible response would combine youth-employment policy, digital-skills pathways, and targeted support for stable work with communication-integrity reforms.
2. **Nigeria's campaign and political-finance rules should require clearer disclosure of paid digital political work.** Where influencers, coordinators, or online mobilisers are compensated directly or indirectly, disclosure rules should make that relationship visible. This would reduce the ability of organised political messaging to masquerade as purely organic civic expression.
3. **Political parties and political actors should be studied as organisers of digital influence, not just as beneficiaries of it.** The findings and recent literature suggest that information disorder in Nigeria is often tied to campaign organisation and informal influence networks, not just to random users. Future institutional reforms should therefore focus on the procurement of digital media services, the use of

intermediaries, and the contingent reward systems that sustain loyalty online.

4. **Civic education and media-literacy efforts should focus on manufactured authenticity.**
   The central democratic danger is not only false content, but the presentation of sponsored influence as an ordinary citizen voice. Media-literacy work, newsroom practice, and civic fact-checking should therefore train attention on repetition patterns, coordination cues, and undisclosed sponsorship in political posting.

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