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# From Business Centres to Hustle Kingdoms: Historical Perspectives on Innovative Models of Deviant Education

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## Abstract

The article pioneers the examination of “hustle kingdoms”: illegal cybercrime training academies in West Africa. It explores these entities as innovative and adaptive institutions that emerge in response to systemic socio-economic strain. This article provides a unique analysis of hustle kingdoms by situating their emergence within the region’s socio-economic, cultural and technological trajectories. It does so by assessing the contemporary manifestation of these cybercrime academies with history in mind to understand the past that created them. It highlights how these cybercrime training academies have evolved from earlier forms, thereby showcasing a unique form of deviant innovation. It contributes to existing literature by addressing the critical gap in the scholarly discourse surrounding these entities and their historical evolution. Drawing on Merton’s strain theory, this historical scholarly endeavour examines how systemic barriers to education and employment have fostered deviant innovation, transforming hustle kingdoms from early fraud enterprises into sophisticated, global cybercrime networks. The analysis highlights the structural disparities that sustain their operations by juxtaposing these academies with conventional educational frameworks. The findings offer novel insights into the intersection of inequality, cultural narratives and technological adaptation, positioning hustle kingdoms as both products and catalysts of systemic strain.

**Keywords:** hustle kingdoms; cybercriminal networks; hustle academies; scamming schools; organized cybercrime

## Introduction

This article examines cases of cybercrime apprenticeship schools in Nigeria, known as hustle kingdoms, scamming schools or hustle academies. This article defines hustle kingdoms as cybercrime apprenticeship schools in West Africa and beyond

that systematically train individuals in Internet fraud through structured learning, peer support and mentorship. The rise of hustle kingdoms, scamming schools and underground cybercrime training centres in West Africa, particularly in Nigeria and Ghana, reflects the persistence of socio-economic inequalities and systemic barriers (Lazarus and Button 2024; PM News 2024). Research indicates that Internet fraudsters frequently migrate from Nigeria to Ghana and other parts of West Africa (Lazarus et al. 2025a). Therefore, the discussions in this article should not be ghettoized as solely Nigerian issues, as cybercrime is transnational and intersects with other critical topics (Lazarus et al. 2025b). At a minimum, they pertain to West Africa as a whole. While media outlets such as PM News (2024) and Patta et al. (2024) have provided descriptive accounts of hustle academies, academic engagement with their historical roots, operational dynamics and socio-economic implications remains notably absent. Thus, this study pioneers an investigation into this gap by examining how cybercrime training academies have evolved from earlier forms. This evolution highlights a distinct manifestation of deviant innovation and adaptation. The absence of prior academic research on the hustle kingdom phenomenon has necessitated reliance on a limited body of existing scholarship. It will also offer an analysis contextualized within Merton's strain theory, shedding light on the structural, cultural and technological factors that sustain these entities.

Hustle kingdoms are not merely byproducts of economic hardship but represent deliberate, adaptive responses to systemic strain (Lazarus and Button 2024). This tension arises when societal aspirations for material success clash with limited legitimate opportunities. This conflict creates fertile ground for deviant innovation (see Merton 1938). Merton's strain theory provides a critical framework for understanding how systemic inequalities compel individuals to devise alternative, often illicit, pathways to achieve societal goals.

Historically, hustle kingdoms are rooted in broader narratives of socio-economic exclusion and adaptive responses across Nigeria and West Africa. British colonial rule, beginning in the 1860s, prioritized resource extraction over local development, leaving a legacy of economic instability, poverty and systemic inequality (Ellis 2016; Lazarus and Button 2022). Fast forward to the 2020s, and many online fraudsters frame defrauding Westerners as a civic duty, perceiving it as reclaiming funds taken from their countries during colonial rule (Lazarus et al. 2023; Lazarus et al. 2025c). Post-independence governance, from 1960 onwards, characterized by widespread corruption and mismanagement, exacerbated these challenges, deepening socio-economic divides (Apter 1999). Over time, this exclusion fostered a "hustling" ethos – a cultural narrative of resourcefulness and resilience – which evolved into structured entities like hustle kingdoms amid the rise of global digital networks.

Technological advances and globalization have further transformed these dynamics. The Internet's diffusion in West Africa created new opportunities for economic adaptation, including digital fraud (Garba, Lazarus, and Button 2024; Hall and Yarwood 2024). Hustle kingdoms capitalize on these technological shifts, providing structured training programmes that mimic formal educational institutions while redirecting these frameworks toward illicit goals (Patta et al. 2024). Historically, these academies evolved from earlier forms of organized fraud, such as the 419 scams of the 1990s, into highly organized enterprises in the post-

2010 era, shaped by worsening socio-economic conditions (Lazarus and Button 2024).

This article adopts a historical treatment approach, situating hustle kingdoms within the continuum of socio-economic exclusion, cultural imperatives and technological adaptation. It addresses a critical gap in academic research by utilizing grey literature, including media accounts and non-academic studies. By integrating historical and sociological perspectives with Merton's strain theory, the article illuminates the conditions that have shaped the emergence and operations of hustle kingdoms. It advocates for targeted socio-economic reforms, adaptive law enforcement strategies and global cooperation to address the structural conditions enabling these entities' proliferation. Therefore, the central research question guiding this historical scholarly endeavour is: How have historical and social barriers shaped the evolution of hustle kingdoms as adaptive responses to strain?

The study's objectives are fourfold:

1. To situate hustle kingdoms within the historical trajectory of socio-economic exclusion in Nigeria and West Africa.
2. To examine how systemic strain, as articulated by strain theory, compels deviant innovation in the form of cybercrime academies.
3. To highlight the global implications of these entities, offering insights into their transnational operations and impact.

This article contributes to broader conversations on the global phenomenon of cybercrime by addressing these questions and objectives. It provides a nuanced understanding of the historical, sociological and cultural forces that sustain hustle kingdoms, shedding light on their historical roots and adaptive mechanisms.

### **Historical Context of Hustle Kingdoms**

The contemporary manifestation of cybercrime academies, hustle kingdoms, must be analysed within a historical context to understand the past that created it. This article examines the hustle kingdom phenomenon, informal cybercrime training centres in West Africa, as introduced above. It explores their development through a historical trajectory of socio-economic challenges, cultural adaptations and systemic shifts in Nigeria and Ghana. These academies, which train individuals in digital fraud, are deeply embedded in the socio-economic fabric of the region and have evolved from earlier forms of organized fraud into global networks (Lazarus and Button 2024). Understanding their historical context involves tracing colonial legacies, post-independence developments, and the interplay of cultural, economic and technological forces.

### **Colonial Legacies and Early Deviance**

During Nigeria's colonial period, perspectives on crime among youth varied. Some colonial observers believed that crime was uncommon among young Nigerians (Apter 1999; Paterson 1944), while others, such as the US Consulate (1949), highlighted the manipulative skills of Nigerian schoolboys. Often derived from

school administrators, these reports suggested that educated youth rather than illiterate individuals were implicated in fraudulent activities. Early examples of deviant behaviour involved crafting letters falsely claiming to sell diamonds, gold and other exotic goods, a precursor to the “419 fraud” schemes of later years (e.g. Apter 1999). These early “wayo trickers” form part of a historical continuum that laid the groundwork for what would become a significant cultural and economic phenomenon: online fraudsters, such as Yahoo Boys (Lazarus 2019).

### ***The Petroleum Boom and Corruption***

The discovery of petroleum in Nigeria in the late 1950s, just prior to independence, profoundly transformed the nation’s socio-economic trajectory. Petroleum rapidly became the linchpin of Nigeria’s economy, but this newfound wealth also entrenched corruption as a defining characteristic of governance and resource management (Apter 1999). As Saro-Wiwa (1989) famously described, political elites came to perceive oil wealth as a “national cake” to be shared among themselves rather than a resource to advance nation-building.

The 1970s marked a period of unparalleled economic abundance, with Nigeria benefitting from the petro-naira, which was pegged at a favourable exchange rate of 1.60 naira to 1 US dollar, even surpassing the value of the dollar at the time (Apter 1999; Ellis 2016). This economic strength conferred significant global purchasing power and transformed Nigeria into an attractive destination for expatriates across diverse professional domains, including education, healthcare, agriculture and architecture (Apter 1999; Ellis 2016). These professionals were drawn to the country’s universities and burgeoning workforce, as Nigeria positioned itself as a promising third-world economy ripe with opportunities for lucrative contracts and a robust market for expertise (Apter 1999; Ellis 2016).

However, like many oil-dependent economies, Nigeria faced the quintessential challenge of resource mismanagement (Lazarus and Button 2022). While it excelled in wealth creation, its governance systems were ill-equipped to effectively allocate and manage the revenues from its oil windfall (Apter 1999; Ellis 2016). This deficiency reinforced a culture of systemic corruption, where the misuse of public funds and misappropriation of oil revenues became widespread (Lazarus and Button 2022). Transparency International evaluated Nigeria and consistently ranked it among the world’s least transparent nations (Ellis 2016; Ibrahim 2016), highlighting the long-term consequences of governance failures during the oil boom era.

Despite its drawbacks, the oil boom of the 1970s also yielded some benefits. The period saw a rising fertility rate and an influx of foreign workers and scholars, contributing to Nigeria’s demographic and intellectual growth (Apter 1999). However, nothing lasts indefinitely, and this prosperity proved to be short lived. The inability to sustain economic and infrastructural development foreshadowed the decline of Nigeria’s oil-driven prosperity (Lazarus and Button 2022).

### ***Economic Decline and the Rise of “Business Centres”***

The oil crisis of the early 1980s marked a turning point. Falling oil prices and the mismanagement of loans prescribed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) plunged Nigeria into economic turmoil (Apter 1999; Ibrahim 2016). For example, the IMF loans have contributed to Nigeria’s long-term debt burden. In the 1980s and 1990s, Nigeria relied on the IMF’s structural adjustment loans, which led to austerity measures and currency devaluation (Apter 1999; Ibrahim 2016). By the early 2000s, Nigeria’s external debt had ballooned to approximately \$30 billion (Ellis 2016), forcing the government to divert resources from education, healthcare and infrastructure towards debt servicing. The structural adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF deepened inequality, creating fertile ground for deviant entrepreneurship. During this period, unemployed graduates, predominantly male, became increasingly vulnerable to engaging in fraud. Elevated aspirations fuelled by the earlier oil boom made unemployment-induced hardship harder to accept (Apter 1999; Ibrahim 2016), echoing Michalos’s (1985) discrepancy theory, which links dissatisfaction to unmet expectations, as Ibrahim (2016) observed. This highlights how university graduates’ upward social comparisons in Nigeria’s struggling economy create a gap between expectations and post-graduation realities (see Ibrahim 2016:54). As these comparisons often lead to dissatisfaction rather than fulfilment, they drive frustration, disillusionment and the turn to cybercrime as an alternative career path.

The economic downturn of the 1980s and 1990s thus coincided with the rise of “business centres”, which served as early precursors to hustle kingdoms (Lazarus and Button 2024). These centres were typically run by a “chairman”, often a university graduate or dropout, who rented offices, hired secretaries and recruited junior scammers to target victims worldwide through letters, phone calls and faxes. Structured and semi-hierarchical, these operations relied on the chairman to provide logistics and funding while trainees honed their fraudulent skills. One notable figure in the proprietorship of these early “business centres” was Fred Ajudua, a law graduate from the University of Benin. Barrister Ajudua was implicated in several high-profile fraud cases involving millions of US dollars on multiple occasions (Apter 1999; EFCC 2021; Lazarus et al. 2023). Some scholars argue that he played a pivotal role in revolutionizing Nigerian 419 frauds during the 1980s and 1990s (Apter 1999; Ibrahim 2016), helping to shape its contemporary online fraud templates (Ibrahim 2016; Lazarus 2018).

### ***Transition to Hustle Kingdoms***

Over time, these “business centres” evolved into the hustle kingdoms of today (Lazarus and Button 2024). By the 2000s, advancements in technology and the globalization of digital networks transformed these local training hubs into transnational threats. Hustle kingdoms blend online and offline methods, providing both virtual and in-person training in cybercrime techniques (Lazarus and Button 2024). Real-life scams linked to hustle-kingdom graduates now include romance fraud, sextortion and business email compromise (BEC) schemes, highlighting the consequences of these academies (Lazarus and Button 2024). The historical

backdrop is particularly significant: the hustle kingdoms evolved from the “business centres” phenomenon of the 1980s and 1990s into today’s sophisticated cybercrime academies. This historical lens deepens our understanding of their lineage and highlights the importance of temporality in shaping deviant institutions.

### ***Cultural Narratives and Justifications***

Hustle kingdoms are not just economic phenomena but also cultural constructs. Pen-and-paper fraudsters (Apter 1999) and their modern counterparts, online fraudsters (Lazarus et al. 2023, 2025c), both frame their activities as acts of restitution for historical injustices, positioning themselves as heirs to those exploited during the eras of the slave trade and colonialism. This juxtaposition highlights the continuity in how successive generations of fraudsters legitimize their actions through narratives of historical redress. For example, Internet scammers in Ghana construct a specific worldview to rationalize their actions as morally acceptable, framing fraud as legitimate retribution for colonial injustice (Lazarus et al. 2025c:1–18). This narrative depicts Westerners as descendants of colonial oppressors, positioning scams as a means of both economic and moral reparation (Lazarus et al. 2025c).

Afrobeats music, a dominant cultural force in Nigeria, glamorizes cybercriminals as symbols of resilience and success (Lazarus 2018; Lazarus et al. 2023). This narrative reinforces societal pressures on young men to demonstrate cultural masculinity through visible material wealth (Lazarus and Okolorie 2019; Smith 2017). As a result, hustle kingdoms become embedded within a broader cultural acceptance of deviance as a survival strategy. While entities like the “Yahoo Boys” dominate in Nigeria (Akanle, Adesina, and Akarah 2016; Lazarus, Button, and Adogame 2022), similar operations, such as the “Sakawa Boys”, exist in Ghana (Abubakari 2025; Abubakari and Blaszczyk 2024; Lazarus et al. 2025c). Unlike their Nigerian counterparts, often linked to organized groups like the Black Axe confraternity (Lazarus 2024), Ghanaian scammers typically operate independently, reflecting regional variations in cybercrime organization and methodology (Button et al. 2024; Lazarus and Button 2024). Hustle kingdoms, shaped by historical, economic and cultural forces, are analysed here through Merton’s strain theory to explore the socio-economic conditions that foster their development.

### **Strain Theory and Deviant Innovation**

Hustle kingdoms have emerged as adaptive responses to systemic socio-economic challenges, aligning closely with Merton’s strain theory. This theory posits that deviance arises when societal aspirations exceed the capacity of institutional structures to provide legitimate means to achieve them. Of Merton’s five modes of adaptation, the “innovation” mode is particularly relevant here, as individuals internalize societal goals but resort to unconventional or illicit pathways to achieve them due to systemic constraints. For a fuller analysis of Merton’s strain theory and its five modes of adaptation, see Merton (1938).

### ***Applying Strain Theory to Hustle Kingdoms***

In West Africa, socio-economic inequalities and restricted access to education have historically created structural strain, driving individuals toward deviant pathways (Lazarus and Button 2022; Yushawu and Jaishankar 2025). Higher education, for instance, remains inaccessible for many due to exorbitant costs borne entirely by families, a burden that excludes significant proportions of young people from legitimate routes to socio-economic mobility (Ibrahim 2015). This exclusion intensifies the gap between aspirations for financial stability and the means to achieve it. Hustle kingdoms represent a continuation of these dynamics, emerging as alternative spaces that institutionalize deviant pathways. Within these academies, individuals receive training in cybercrime activities such as hacking, sextortion, romance fraud and BEC schemes (Patta et al. 2024; PM News 2024). These institutions reflect an adaptive response to systemic exclusions, offering illicit routes to financial success.

Strain theory, as articulated by Merton (1938), highlights how systemic barriers exacerbate pressures on marginalized individuals, pushing them toward deviance as a survival mechanism. In Nigeria's socio-economic realities, restricted access to education and a stagnant economy create significant barriers to legitimate opportunities. As a result, cybercrime is often perceived as a necessity rather than a mere option. For instance, out of 12 individuals arrested and jailed by the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), none had a university education (EFCC 2024). Two possessed only primary school certificates (PM News 2024). A growing body of qualitative research supports this view (Lazarus 2018; Lazarus and Button 2022; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019). Economic hardship and limited educational opportunities push many towards cybercrime as a survival strategy (Lazarus 2018; Lazarus, Button, and Adogame 2022). The limited access to higher education among participants in hustle kingdoms illustrates this dynamic, where aspirations for upward mobility clash with systemic exclusions. By framing cybercrime as an adaptive response to structural strain, strain theory situates hustle kingdoms within the broader context of socio-economic disparities.

### ***Innovation and Deviant Pathways***

Merton's (1938) concept of innovation within strain theory provides critical insights into the drivers and outcomes of deviant pathways. When individuals internalize societal values that glorify material success, but face blocked legitimate avenues, they often turn to alternative strategies. The hustle-kingdom phenomenon epitomizes this mode of innovation, institutionalizing deviance by equipping individuals with skills and knowledge in cybercrime to circumvent systemic constraints. These academies are products of socio-economic strain, reinforcing deviant practices within a context of historical and systemic inequities. Strain theory illuminates how structural exclusions shape deviant behaviour by framing hustle kingdoms as both a symptom and outcome of innovation under strain.

### ***Hustle Kingdoms: Consequences, Symptoms and Catalysts***

Hustle kingdoms exemplify how systemic inequalities have historically fuelled deviant environments. These institutions are not merely opportunistic adaptations to individual hardship but are deeply embedded within a socio-economic structure that perpetuates cycles of exclusion and deviance. Strain theory highlights how these academies mirror systemic failures, highlighting their emergence as both responses to and drivers of socio-economic strain (Merton 1938). By offering a deviant pathway to financial success, hustle kingdoms amplify the consequences of these systemic failures (Lazarus and Button 2024), creating resilient spaces of cybercrime innovation. Understanding the historical conditions and systemic inequities that have enabled such deviant institutions offers a nuanced perspective on their role in the global cybercrime landscape. By situating hustle kingdoms within the framework of strain theory, their emergence is contextualized as part of a broader pattern of innovation under strain, revealing how systemic exclusions shape deviant institutional practices.

## **Hustle Kingdoms and the Educational Divide**

### ***Accessibility and Cost***

Business centres, from which hustle kingdoms evolved, are historically notable for their financial accessibility, offering an alternative for economically disadvantaged individuals in West Africa. Like business centres, these cybercrime academies typically require no upfront fees, making them particularly appealing to young people excluded from formal education due to financial constraints. Historical accounts suggest that participants valued the absence of barriers to entry (Apter 1999; Ellis 2016), reflecting broader systemic inequalities in educational access.

In contrast, formal education in countries like Nigeria and Ghana has historically imposed significant financial burdens on families. The high cost of tuition across all levels – nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary – has excluded large proportions of the population. This exclusion perpetuates socio-economic disparities and limits legitimate paths to upward mobility. Fieldwork conducted in cybercrime hubs, including Ghana and Nigeria (Button et al. 2024), has revealed that many parents, particularly mothers, actively support their “sons” in entering the scamming industry. This support includes facilitating mentorship opportunities within hustle kingdoms, sustaining their criminal earnings, and even providing legal assistance when their children face prosecution. The “associations of mothers of Yahoo Boys” (Button et al. 2024:44) exemplify these layers of maternal support in West African scamming industries. These dynamics underline the sociological interactions between systemic economic pressures and familial involvement in sustaining cybercrime networks.

### ***Purpose and Outcomes***

Hustle kingdoms and conventional education have historically served divergent purposes. Hustle kingdoms can be understood as adaptations to socio-economic constraints, explicitly equipping individuals with the skills to engage in digital fraud,



such as romance fraud, sextortion hacking and BEC (EFCC 2024; Lazarus and Button 2024). These academies have functioned as shortcuts to financial stability, often framed within narratives of adaptive survival strategies. Conversely, conventional education in West Africa has historically sought to prepare students for legitimate careers, offering theoretical and practical knowledge aligned with formal economic structures. However, persistent structural issues such as unemployment have frequently undermined these aspirations, driving some individuals to consider alternative pathways like hustle kingdoms.

### ***Structure and Organization***

Hustle kingdoms mimic aspects of hierarchical organization seen in formal educational institutions but remain distinctly goal-oriented and pragmatically structured. Historically, these academies have been led by a “chairman”, who oversees operations, provides resources and mentors participants. This lean model prioritizes efficiency, blending online and in-person instruction to deliver targeted skills in cybercrime (Lazarus and Button 2024). Formal educational systems, by comparison, have been characterized by rigid bureaucratic structures with fixed curriculums and administrative protocols (EFCC 2024; PM News 2024). While aimed at holistic development, these systems have often failed to address the dynamic economic challenges faced by their graduates.

### ***Economic Drivers***

Economic conditions in West Africa have long shaped the divergent roles of hustle kingdoms and formal education. Hustle kingdoms thrive in contexts where systemic barriers exclude many from education and employment, offering an immediate, though illicit, route to financial success. Conversely, conventional education has traditionally been positioned as a cornerstone of nation-building and legitimate socio-economic mobility. However, as London School of Economics and Political Science (2025), Apter (1999) and Lazarus (2018) discussed, its perceived inability to meet rising aspirations among West African youths has diminished its appeal, especially where opportunities remain limited.

Formal education has historically struggled from the late 1980s to date to meet the economic needs of a growing youth population (Lazarus and Button 2022). Issues such as underfunding, high tuition costs and limited job opportunities for graduates have intensified socio-economic pressures, making alternatives like hustle kingdoms more attractive. Its constrained capacity to address unemployment has limited its broader impact, further highlighting the divide between these two systems. Hustle kingdoms, therefore, illustrate how systemic inequalities and innovative criminal tactics intersect to create resilient and adaptable cybercrime networks.

In this setting, all economic activities inherently reflect sociocultural dimensions and must be understood and evaluated in that light. While formal schools have aimed to integrate individuals into legitimate economic structures, hustle kingdoms are framed here as adaptive institutions that exploit systemic gaps, providing deviant pathways to success. Their contrasts in accessibility, purpose, structure and

cultural alignment underscore the urgency of addressing socio-economic and cultural inequalities that sustain hustle kingdoms, challenging the foundations of education and mobility in the region.

### **The Structure and Dynamics of Hustle Kingdoms**

Hustle kingdoms, typically operating from sophisticated, secretive locations such as bungalows and duplexes, are understood to epitomize high-tech cybercrime operations (Lazarus and Button 2024; Patta et al. 2024; PM News 2024). The clandestine design of these facilities, marked by restricted access and odd-hour activities, has been characterized as complicating tracking and surveillance, thereby enhancing secrecy and evasion capabilities. Unlike conventional institutions such as polytechnics or cosmetology schools, hustle kingdoms are framed as highly mobile operations, enabling quick adaptation and relocation to avoid detection (EFCC 2024). This agility underscores their hypothetical operational efficiency and resilience against law enforcement efforts.

### **Training Practices and Operational Contrasts**

Training at hustle kingdoms has been described as typically spanning one to six months, during which participants acquire specialized digital fraud skills, including technical scamming methods (Lazarus and Button 2024; Patta et al. 2024; PM News 2024). Accounts contrast this with traditional educational institutions in Nigeria, which are hindered by high costs, bureaucratic inefficiencies and a high unemployment rate among graduates (Ibrahim 2016). While formal education has historically struggled to provide practical opportunities, hustle kingdoms are seen to address economic needs rapidly by offering immediate, though illicit, pathways to financial gain. Trainees remit a proportion of their earnings as tuition to their “chairman”, reflecting a profit-driven model rooted in socio-economic exclusion. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to suggest that the prominence of these academies is a reflection of systemic gaps in education, highlighting critical deficiencies that necessitate reforms to tackle the socio-economic roots of cybercrime proliferation.

### **Voluntary and Coerced Participation: Comparative Perspectives**

The prevailing narrative in West African cybercrime literature positions participants as active agents who willingly engage in fraudulent activities. Studies have documented such dynamics in Ghana (Abubakari 2024; Abubakari and Blaszczyk 2024; Alhassan and Ridwan 2023; Lazarus et al. 2025c), Cameroon (Fuh 2021; Whittaker and Button 2020; Whittaker et al. 2025), Ivory Coast (Cretu-Adatte et al. 2024) and Nigeria (Aborisade 2022a; Akanle et al. 2016; Garba, Lazarus, and Button 2024; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019). In contrast, research on Southeast Asia suggests a different dynamic, marked by coercion through human trafficking and exploitative labour practices (Franceschini et al. 2024, 2025; Lazarus, Chiang, and Button 2025b). While cybercriminals in West Africa are often characterized as engaging willingly, their Southeast Asian counterparts frequently experience involuntary conscription. But a deeper examination of this comparison is revealing.

### **Psychological Coercion Within Hustle Kingdoms**

Although hustle kingdoms predominantly rely on voluntary participation, historical narratives indicate a nuanced form of coercion within these academies. Unlike the physical bondage observed in Southeast Asian trafficking networks (Franceschini et al. 2024, 2025), hustle kingdoms are associated with psychological and spiritual methods to ensure compliance. Research on sex trafficking involving Nigerians, both as perpetrators and victims, reveals that offenders use juju magic as a spiritual mechanism of control, ensuring compliance and obedience (Scalia 2024). It is not unreasonable to suggest that juju magic reinforces control over trainees in hustle academies. Research indicates that cybercriminals exploit juju magic not only to manipulate and defraud victims but also to evade law enforcement (e.g. Lazarus 2019; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019; Yushawu and Jaishankar 2025). By instilling fear and psychological dependence, it strengthens control over trainees within these criminal enterprises or scamming schools. More broadly, studies highlight its deep entrenchment in cybercrime operations across West Africa, where it is used to enforce loyalty, suppress resistance and legitimize fraudulent activities (Lazarus 2019; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019; Yushawu and Jaishankar 2025). Though less overtly violent, these subtle tactics significantly impede personal autonomy and reinforce hierarchical structures. By juxtaposing their voluntary and coercive dynamics with global contexts, it becomes evident that these operations are deeply entrenched in local sociocultural conditions.

### **Contrasting Hustle Kingdoms and East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian Cybercrime Syndicates in West Africa**

Developments in late 2024, such as the emergence of East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates in Nigeria, are challenging the localized framework of hustle kingdoms. For instance, in December 2024, the Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC) raided a seven-storey building in Lagos, arresting 792 suspects, including Nigerian, Chinese, Arab and Filipino nationals allegedly involved in cryptocurrency fraud and romance scams, according to media sources (Premium Times 2024). The comparison between hustle kingdoms and East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates in Nigeria reveals nuanced similarities and differences, offering deeper insights into the evolving nature of cybercrime networks.

First, hustle kingdoms are rooted in local leadership, with Nigerian actors leveraging their cultural and economic knowledge. In contrast, East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime digital syndicates in Nigeria are led by foreign nationals, including Chinese, Arab and Filipino individuals. This transnational leadership marks a departure from the localized control of hustle kingdoms, positioning these syndicates as global networks.

Second, both hustle kingdoms and East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates exhibit mentorship-driven frameworks. Hustle kingdoms involve comprehensive training to integrate recruits into their systems, while the East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates conduct induction sessions to equip Nigerian recruits with skills such as impersonation and fraud initiation. However, the East Asian, Middle Eastern

and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates lack the cultural integration of hustle kingdoms, including symbolic rituals or juju practices used to enforce loyalty.

Third, hustle kingdoms are deeply intertwined with local practices and rituals, which maintain group cohesion and control. In contrast, East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates rely solely on anonymity and financial incentives, foregoing the cultural tools employed by hustle kingdoms. This lack of cultural embedding reflects the syndicates' external orientation and focus on operational efficiency.

Fourth, both networks display similar hierarchical structures. Nigerian recruits handle victim engagement, while senior actors manage financial manipulation. However, financial practices differ significantly. Hustle kingdoms use transparent profit-sharing systems that reinforce loyalty, whereas East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates employ opaque payment methods, often involving cash or personal accounts, which complicates financial accountability.

Fifth, both networks exploit socio-economic vulnerabilities, recruiting economically disadvantaged individuals with low barriers to entry, such as basic typing skills. The hustle kingdom phenomenon offers participants more than just material incentives. It provides cultural resonance, identity and a sense of belonging. A "good" hustle kingdom proprietor or "chairman" might reinvest part of a student's earnings into landed property in their hometown or village, reinforcing long-term social and economic ties. The same cannot be said for East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates operating in West Africa. They rely solely on financial incentives, offering no additional benefits to their recruits beyond monetary gain. Both networks employ advanced technological tools to enhance operations, including SIM cards, high-end computers and international phone lines. Their transnational victim bases, spanning the US, Canada, Australia, Mexico and Europe, highlight their global reach. However, East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates' foreign leadership provides swifter and greater access to international resources, distinguishing them from hustle kingdoms.

The East Asian, Middle Eastern and Southeast Asian cybercrime syndicates in Nigeria and hustle kingdoms share significant similarities in hierarchical structures, technological sophistication and socio-economic targeting. However, their differences, particularly in leadership, cultural embedding and financial practices, reflect broader trends in cybercrime. Localized networks increasingly intersect with transnational actors, shaping the evolving contours and dynamics of cybercriminal operations. These comparisons align with the research of Lazarus (2024) and Lusthaus et al. (2024) on the fluidity and adaptability of cybercriminal organizations. Their findings provide critical insights not only for developing nuanced intervention strategies but also for research examining the knock-on effects of cybercrime syndicates from East Asia, the Middle East and Southeast Asia operating in West Africa.

### Contribution to Prior Research

The article makes significant contributions to the existing body of cybercrime literature. These contributions are outlined in Table 1 and focus on the historical and structural features of hustle kingdoms. These features distinguish hustle

**Table 1.** Key insights on hustle kingdoms

Themes	Key findings
Historical roots	Hustle kingdoms evolved from earlier forms of organized fraud such as “business centres” of the 1980s and 1990s
Theoretical insights	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Merton’s strain theory explains hustle kingdoms as adaptive responses to systemic socio-economic strain</li> <li>– Systemic barriers, such as restricted access to education and employment, push marginalized individuals toward cybercrime</li> </ul>
Cultural dimensions	Historical narratives of restitution for colonial exploitation serve as a moral justification for cybercrime activities
Educational divide	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Hustle kingdoms thrive due to systemic inequities in education, offering alternatives for disadvantaged youth</li> <li>– Conventional education often fails due to underfunding, unemployment and misaligned curricula</li> </ul>
Operational structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Hustle kingdoms operate as semi-hierarchical organizations blending online and offline training methods</li> <li>– They emphasize profitability and efficiency, with trainees remitting earnings to mentors</li> <li>– Psychological and spiritual coercion, such as juju magic, is used as a unique control mechanism</li> </ul>
Broader implications	Hustle kingdoms are both consequences of systemic failures and catalysts for further socio-economic inequities

kingdoms from previously studied cybercriminal groups. While prior analyses by Nguyen and Luong (2021), Décarry-Hétu and Dupont (2012), Lazarus (2024), Cretu-Adatte et al. (2024), Lusthaus et al. (2024) and Leukfeldt, Kleemans, and Stol (2017) have focused on the decentralized nature of cybercrime networks, this article explores how hustle kingdoms diverge from this model. Unlike the typically fluid and decentralized structures of other cybercrime groups, hustle kingdoms are framed as exhibiting a defined semi-hierarchy with clear roles and systematic profit distribution mechanisms, resembling elements of traditional organized crime. In these academies, the “chair” assumes managerial responsibilities, overseeing logistics and claiming a substantial share of the profits, traits akin to conventional criminal enterprises.

Although hustle kingdoms share hierarchical characteristics, they are not equated with the rigid governance structures of traditional mafias, such as the Yakuza, Bratva or Italian Mafia. As noted by Nguyen and Luong (2021), Lazarus (2024), Décarry-Hétu and Dupont (2012) and Leukfeldt et al. (2017), cybercrime networks often diverge from the strict control mechanisms typical of organized crime groups, favouring more flexible and adaptive approaches. Similarly, while hustle kingdoms maintain an element of hierarchy, they operate with considerably less formality and rigidity than mafia organizations. This balance between structure and flexibility has been interpreted as enhancing their adaptability, as seen in their ability to swiftly relocate and evade law enforcement – a hallmark of many modern cybercrime networks.

This article also highlights the role distribution within hustle kingdoms, reflecting both the cohesion and limitations of their networks. While displaying internal ties similar to those documented in the hacker group studied by Décary-Héту and Dupont (2012), hustle kingdoms are presented as distinct due to their frequent interactions and more rigid hierarchical organization. However, despite these structural features, hustle kingdoms lack the sustained durability of traditional criminal organizations, further illustrating their hybrid nature. Additionally, unlike research that has primarily focused on narratives from self-identified fraudsters in university settings (Akanle et al. 2016; Aransiola and Asindemade 2011; Ogunleye, Ojedokun, and Aderinto 2019), this article draws on historical perspectives to contextualize the evolution of hustle kingdoms. While media outlets such as PM News (2024) and Lazarus and Button (2024) have noted connections between Internet fraud and these academies in their public engagement article; academic research reports exploring these historical linkages remain non-existent.

This article also challenges prevailing narratives in West African cybercrime literature, which often depict perpetrators as voluntary participants in fraud schemes across Ghana (Abubakari and Blaszczyk 2024; Alhassan and Ridwan 2023; Lazarus et al. 2025c), Cameroon (Fuh 2021; Whittaker and Button 2020; Whittaker et al. 2025), Ivory Coast (Cretu-Adatte et al. 2024) and Nigeria (Aborisade 2022b; Akanle et al. 2016; Soares and Lazarus 2024). The article underscores the complexity of coercion within hustle kingdoms by drawing on historical insights. Unlike traditional human trafficking networks, coercion within hustle kingdoms is framed as psychological and spiritual, with tactics such as juju magic introducing a unique cultural dimension to control mechanisms. This differentiation offers a novel perspective on the dynamics of coercion in cybercrime operations. This article contributes to historical and theoretical understandings of cybercrime networks by examining the incorporation of spiritual manipulation into hustle kingdom-oriented practices. This perspective is new to cyber criminology scholarship.

## Conclusion

The article has been the first to examine hustle kingdoms as innovative and adaptive institutions that respond to systemic socio-economic strain. It has highlighted how these cybercrime training academies have evolved from earlier forms, thereby showcasing a unique form of deviant innovation. To understand the evolution of hustle kingdoms, this article has examined the past that created it because it historically metamorphosed from the “business centres” phenomenon. The article has explored the emergence of hustle kingdoms within the broader historical, theoretical and sociocultural contexts of West Africa. The discussion also illuminated how systemic barriers, particularly in education and employment, historically drive disenfranchised individuals to innovate through deviant pathways by situating these cybercrime training academies within Merton’s strain theory. Specifically, the research integrated Merton’s strain theory to develop propositions about the socio-economic conditions that foster hustle kingdoms.

The narrative of socio-economic exclusion, compounded by governance failures, underlines hustle kingdoms as adaptive responses to deeply entrenched structural

**Table 2.** Recommendations for policymakers and educators

Theme	Recommendation	Objective
Accessible education	Implement programmes to reduce the financial burden of higher education	Broaden access to legitimate socio-economic mobility pathways
Vocational training	Introduce skill-based vocational training as an alternative to cybercrime academies	Align education with the practical demands of the job market
Law enforcement	Develop specialized task forces with digital forensics expertise	Combat sophisticated cybercrime operations like hustle kingdoms effectively
Public awareness campaigns	Launch initiatives to challenge cultural narratives that glamorize cybercrime	Shift public perceptions using media and community leadership
International collaboration	Work with global organizations to track and disrupt transnational cybercrime networks	Strengthen global intelligence-sharing and resource allocation against crime

inequalities. This perspective offers a stark juxtaposition to conventional educational systems in the region, revealing the socio-economic conditions that sustain these alternative institutions. Thus, we examined the guiding research question through a historical lens: How have historical and social barriers shaped the evolution of hustle kingdoms as adaptive responses to strain?

Hustle kingdoms are both consequences and drivers of systemic failures, reflecting structural strain, cultural pressures and technological adaptation. They are also a reflection of the structural strain, cultural pressures and technological adaptation that created it. The implications and suggestions for both policymakers and researchers are detailed in Table 2. This historical scholarly endeavour highlighted the need for targeted socio-economic reforms to address the systemic conditions that foster cybercrime academies. Future research should further explore the intersections of cultural narratives and systemic strain to develop holistic strategies for combating the proliferation of hustle kingdoms.

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## Translated Abstracts

### Abstracto

El artículo es pionero en el análisis de los hustle kingdoms (academias ilegales de formación en materia de ciberdelincuencia en África occidental) como instituciones innovadoras y adaptables que responden a la tensión socioeconómica sistémica. Este artículo ofrece un análisis histórico único de los hustle kingdoms al situar su surgimiento dentro de las trayectorias socioeconómicas, culturales y tecnológicas de la región. Destaca cómo estas academias de formación en materia de ciberdelincuencia han evolucionado a partir de formas anteriores, mostrando así una forma única de innovación desviada. Contribuye a la literatura existente al abordar la brecha crítica en el discurso académico que rodea a estas entidades y su evolución histórica. Basándose en la teoría de la tensión de Merton, el estudio examina cómo las barreras sistémicas a la educación y el empleo han fomentado la innovación desviada, transformando a los hustle kingdoms de empresas de fraude tempranas en redes sofisticadas y globales de ciberdelincuencia. El análisis destaca las disparidades estructurales que sustentan sus operaciones al yuxtaponer estas academias con marcos educativos convencionales. Los hallazgos ofrecen nuevas perspectivas sobre la intersección de la desigualdad, las narrativas culturales y la adaptación tecnológica, posicionando a los reinos del ajeteo como productos y catalizadores de la tensión sistémica.

**Palabras clave:** reinos del ajeteo; academias del ajeteo; teoría de la tensión; trayectorias históricas; innovación desviada

**Abstrait**

Cet article est le premier à examiner les hustle kingdoms – des académies illégales de formation à la cybercriminalité en Afrique de l’Ouest – en tant qu’institutions innovantes et adaptatives qui répondent aux tensions socio-économiques systémiques. Cet article fournit une analyse historique unique des hustle kingdoms en situant leur émergence dans les trajectoires socio-économiques, culturelles et technologiques de la région. Il met en évidence la manière dont ces académies de formation à la cybercriminalité ont évolué à partir de formes antérieures, mettant ainsi en valeur une forme unique d’innovation déviante. Il contribue à la littérature existante en comblant le vide critique dans le discours scientifique entourant ces entités et leur évolution historique. S’appuyant sur la théorie de la tension de Merton, l’étude examine comment les barrières systémiques à l’éducation et à l’emploi ont favorisé l’innovation déviante, transformant les hustle kingdoms d’entreprises frauduleuses précoces en réseaux de cybercriminalité mondiaux sophistiqués. L’analyse met en évidence les disparités structurelles qui soutiennent leurs opérations en juxtaposant ces académies aux cadres éducatifs conventionnels. Les résultats offrent de nouvelles perspectives sur l’intersection entre les inégalités, les récits culturels et l’adaptation technologique, positionnant les hustle kingdoms à la fois comme des produits et des catalyseurs de tensions systémiques.

**Mots-clés:** hustle kingdoms; académies de formation à la cybercriminalité; théorie de la tension; trajectoires historiques; innovation déviante

**摘要**

本文率先研究了 hustle kingdoms (西非的非法网络犯罪培训学院), 将其视为应对系统性社会经济压力的创新和适应性机构。本文通过将 hustle kingdoms 的出现置于该地区的社会经济、文化和技术轨迹中, 对其进行了独特的历史分析。它强调了这些网络犯罪培训学院是如何从早期形式演变而来的, 从而展示了一种独特的异常创新形式。它通过解决围绕这些实体及其历史演变的学术论述中的关键空白, 为现有文献做出了贡献。该研究借鉴了默顿的压力理论, 探讨了系统性的教育和就业障碍如何促进了异常创新, 将 hustle kingdoms 从早期的欺诈企业转变为复杂的全球网络犯罪网络。分析通过将学院与传统教育框架并列, 突出了维持其运营的结构差异。研究结果为不平等、文化叙事和技术适应的交集提供了新的见解, 将 hustle kingdoms 定位为系统性压力的产物和催化剂。

**关键词:** hustle kingdoms; hustle academies; 压力理论; 历史轨迹; 异常创新

**الملخص**

تعتبر هذه المقالة رائدة في دراسة ممالك الصخب – أكاديميات التدريب على الجرائم الإلكترونية غير القانونية في غرب إفريقيا – كمؤسسات مبتكرة ومتكيفة تستجيب للضغوط الاجتماعية والاقتصادية النظامية. تقدم هذه المقالة تحليلاً تاريخياً فريداً لممالك الصخب من خلال وضع ظهورها ضمن المسارات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية والثقافية والتكنولوجية في المنطقة. وتسلط الضوء على كيفية تطور أكاديميات التدريب على الجرائم الإلكترونية هذه من أشكال سابقة، وبالتالي عرض شكل فريد من أشكال الابتكار المنحرف. وتساهم في الأدبيات الموجودة من خلال معالجة الفجوة الحرجة في الخطاب العلمي المحيط بهذه الكيانات وتطورها التاريخي. واستناداً إلى نظرية الضغوط لميرتون، تدرس الدراسة كيف عززت الحواجز النظامية أمام التعليم والتوظيف الابتكار المنحرف، وحولت ممالك الصخب من مؤسسات احتيالي مبكرة إلى شبكات عالمية متطورة للجرائم الإلكترونية. ويسلط التحليل الضوء على التفاوتات البنيوية التي تدعم عملياتها من خلال مقارنة هذه الأكاديميات بالأطر التعليمية التقليدية. تقدم النتائج رؤى جديدة حول تقاطع عدم المساواة والسرديات الثقافية والتكيف التكنولوجي، مما يضع ممالك الصخب كمنتجات ومحفزات للضغط النظامي.

**الكلمات الرئيسية:** ممالك الصخب؛ أكاديميات الصخب؛ نظرية الضغط؛ المسارات التاريخية؛ الابتكار المنحرف

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