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COMPETING NARRATIVES OF DEVELOPMENT: SOCIAL MEDIA, DIGITAL FINANCE AND SUSTAINABLE GOLD MINING IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Beginning with the transformation of African economies from both digital innovations and developing natural resources along with changes in communication channels, it is becoming clear that there is a growing interdependence of all three. Digital finance and sustainable gold mining have individually received a fair amount of attention in recent years. However, the comparative lack of scholarly attention to date regarding how social media creates competing narratives about both of these areas of business development, and thus influences public perception of them as contributing to Africa's long term development is significant. Utilising a qualitative methodology for this conceptual study, we perform a thematic narrative synthesis of published academic literature, theoretical scholarship and relevant policy documents (Braun and Clarke, 2021; Creswell and Creswell, 2023). As such, the purpose of this paper is to explore how digital communications create multiple visions of economic development throughout the African continent. Through the use of Self-Branding theory (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2017), Networked Publics (Boyd, 2010), Connective Action (Bennett and Segerberg, 2012), Agenda Setting Theory (McCombs and Shaw, 1972) and Framing Theory (Entman, 1993), we identify how various actors including influencers, government organisations, private sector companies and civil society organisations attempt to achieve credibility, validity and trust through their utilisation of digital platforms. Ultimately, our findings demonstrate that cryptocurrency and sustainable gold mining have become symbolic representations of larger debates concerning issues of financial inclusion, environmental sustainability, good governance and economic independence. Furthermore, we argue that social media serves not just as a conduit for information but also as a forum in which different actors compete to gain authority and control over the direction of policy debate while shaping public opinion regarding what constitutes effective development. In conclusion, this paper adds to ongoing discussions about power, policy and practice by presenting an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that combines theories of communication studies, media studies and development studies to describe how digital narratives are increasingly influencing the ways in which Africa is positioned in the rapidly changing global economy and political landscape.

Keywords: *Africa, Social Media, Digital Finance, Cryptocurrency, Sustainable Gold Mining, Economic Development, Digital Communication, Power, Policy.*

1. Introduction

The emergence of innovative technologies, demographic shifts, increasing levels of digital interconnectivity and changing relationships among states have produced a paradigmatic shift in Africa's economic evolution. The last ten years have seen unprecedented growth in digital entrepreneurship, financial technology (Fintech), mobile banking and platform economies in Africa. While digital technologies offer potential new avenues for economic participation for many people in Africa, they are also disrupting traditional models of development. As leading centers of global economic power continue to fragment, African economies are now operating in an environment characterised by multiple players vying for power; shifting allegiances and a rapidly evolving form of digital governance. Consequently, issues related to power, authority and economic development have come into sharp relief to understand Africa's positioning in an emerging global order. One of the largest changes observed has been the proliferation of the digital economy. Advances in internet accessibility, smartphone adoption and digital infrastructure have enabled millions of Africans to utilise online markets and financial services that were unavailable prior. Mobile payment systems, digital entrepreneurship and blockchain technologies have changed how people in Africa save, invest, send money and conduct business across national borders. Although cryptocurrency adoption has increased rapidly in countries like Nigeria, Kenya and South Africa - largely due to regulatory uncertainty - there are also numerous reasons why it may be adopted including economic instability, currency depreciation, high remittance costs and limited access to traditional banking services. In addition to being a technological innovation, digital finance represents a broader set of debates regarding financial inclusion, sovereignty over economic affairs and participation within global financial systems.

In addition to digital developments occurring throughout the continent, Africa remains strategically positioned in the global economy due to its vast natural resources. Africa contains gold, cobalt, lithium, rare earth minerals and other critical materials essential to domestic economic development and international supply chains. Gold mining continues to be economically important for many African countries by providing employment opportunities, foreign investment dollars and export revenue dollars. At the same time however, extractive industries create very contentious debates regarding environmental sustainability, governance models, community development programs and corporate accountability. As such, governments, multinational corporations, local communities and civil society organisations provide competing narratives about the benefits and consequences of resource extraction. Therefore, development cannot be viewed simply as an economic process but also as a contested political and communicative process.

Additionally, these debates occur more frequently within digital communication environments. Social media platforms have become important spaces where governments, corporations, activists, journalists, industry experts and online influencers compete to define public opinion of economic development, sustainability & financial innovations. In addition to serving as channels of communication, social media platforms like YouTube, X, Facebook, TikTok enable the creation, dissemination and contestation of discourses that can shape public opinion, influence investor behaviour and guide policy discussions. Influencers develop credibility through personal branding & perceived authenticity, whereas digital communities amplify particular perspectives through sharing, commenting & algorithmic visibility. As a result, authority within digital environments is increasingly negotiated through visibility, engagement & networked participation and not solely through institutional expertise.

Prior research studies have examined cryptocurrency adoption, sustainable mining practices & digital activism as separate phenomena. Likewise, prior studies examining the impact of social media on the study of Fintech or environmental advocacy have typically investigated each subject matter separately. Relatively little attention has been given to how digital communication simultaneously shapes competing visions of Africa's future economic growth, especially where emerging forms of digital finance intersect with traditional extractive sectors. Understanding these competing visions becomes increasingly important as they have the potential to influence not only public perception but also policy priorities, investment decisions and broadened definitions of development throughout the continent. Utilising theories of self-branding, connective action, networked publics, agenda setting theory and framing theory, this paper examines how social media contributes to creating competing views regarding Africa's economic transformation. Instead of viewing cryptocurrency and gold mining as unrelated sectors, this paper seeks to position both as symbolic representations of broader debates concerning development, sustainability, technological innovation and economic power. Through this framework this paper argues that social media is becoming an increasingly important arena for competing actors seeking to legitimise their own models of Africa's future development and also negotiate questions of authority, trust and economic sovereignty. This interdisciplinary approach will provide contemporary contributions to discussions on power, policies and practices by demonstrating how digital narratives are increasingly shaping Africa's repositioning within an evolving global political and economic landscape.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Africa's Economic Transformation and the Digital Economy

The economic climate of Africa has significantly changed in recent years due to population increase, technological innovations and increased digital connections. With an increasing number of people using mobile devices, accessing the Internet and starting digital business ventures, there is an increasing number of different ways that Africans are economically participating. Many African countries are developing new digital-based economic systems to overcome long-standing issues with access to finances, access to markets and inefficient institutions. As such, Africa is being considered as one of the fastest-developing areas for mobile financial services and technology-based entrepreneurial activity.

One of the largest influences of this transformation has been digital finance. Digital payment platforms, digital banking services and blockchain technologies have provided financial inclusion to previously excluded groups who do not have access to traditional banking in their region. Cross-border transaction capabilities, lower remittance fees and new opportunities for microbusinesses and entrepreneurs have arisen from the use of digital financial service products. Thus, digital finance has progressed beyond just the use of technology, into a means by which individuals can achieve greater economic participation, financial freedom and stability in uncertain economic climates.

Cryptocurrency has also developed as a component of this larger digital financial system. Several African countries (Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa and Ghana) have seen an increase in the adoption rate of cryptocurrency despite regulatory uncertainty. For many users, cryptocurrencies provide practical options for conducting international remittances, protecting against inflationary pressures, and becoming participants in the global digital marketplace. However, others view cryptocurrencies as providing unacceptably high risks related to financial stability, regulatory oversight, and consumer protection. The differing views regarding the role of cryptocurrency illustrate that the legitimacy of digital finance should not be determined solely by technological aspects; rather, digital finance should be viewed in conjunction with how it is perceived socially.

2.2 Gold Mining and Sustainable Development in Africa

Digital transformation is having a major impact on many aspects of Africa’s economy. However, the continent continues to rely heavily on natural resources in order to develop. The gold mining sector is one of the largest of Africa’s extractive sectors and contributes significantly to each country’s Gross National Income, export earnings, employment and foreign direct investment. Countries such as Ghana, South Africa, Mali, Tanzania and Burkina Faso have built large scale mining sectors that are shaping national economic policies for both the private sector and attracting foreign investments. While mining generates considerable economic benefits, there are also ongoing issues concerning environmental sustainability, governance and social responsibility. As a result of mining operations, several environmental challenges have emerged, including deforestation, water pollution, habitat destruction and the relocation of local communities. This has resulted in a growing number of stakeholders, including government departments, multinational companies, local communities, environmental groups and the mining sector itself, all vying to frame the public view of sustainable resource use and good practice within mining.

Research over recent years indicates that sustainability is now being used as both a strategic communications narrative and as an operational goal. Many organisations are communicating their commitment to reducing their environmental footprint through digital media platforms. At the same time, the stakeholders who engage with this communication are using digital activism and independent research reports to verify the credibility of these claims. Past research concerning "green washing" demonstrates that although some companies’ environmental communications may focus on positive initiatives they often minimise or do not disclose the negative environmental consequences of their operations (Laufer, 2003; Lyon & Montgomery, 2015) . Therefore, the debate around gold mining is no longer limited to the physical process of extracting minerals but has moved into the digital space where legitimacy, accountability and trust amongst stakeholders are continuously negotiated.

2.3 Social Media Influencers and Digital Authority

Social media have dramatically changed how stories about economics and politics are developed and spread. Today, many social media "influencers" do not work in just fashion, lifestyle and entertainment industries. They now help develop discussions about things like sustainable investing, business start-ups, government policies and a host of other financial and sustainability-related topics. By repeatedly interacting with their target audience, social media influencers create reputation, community and also large-scale problems and issues understood by their audience.

According to Khamis, Ang and Welling (2017), social media influencers are developing themselves through processes of self-brands. Through these self-brands, an individual develops a unique identity that is intended to draw attention to themselves as well as establish their authority. In contrast to traditional authorities who typically earn legitimacy based on professional affiliations, social media influencers earn their influence from visibility, perceived authenticity and the engagement they receive from their followers. An influencer's brand becomes a valuable communication tool that allows them to facilitate public conversation around various subjects. As their followers engage through liking, commenting and sharing posts on social media, their influencer identity is continually validated through collaborative digital interactions.

This approach to social media influencers aligns with Varoufakis' (2016) assertion that today's societies primarily operate through branding and visibility. Consequently, both cryptocurrency advocates and sustainability activists serve as both communicators and brands in digital spaces and seek to gain legitimacy for their perspectives through demonstrating expertise, being consistent and earning the trust of their audience. Ultimately, social media influencers' authority transcends mere possession of technical knowledge and encompasses the ability to craft compelling narratives that connect with a particular online community.

2.4 Networked Publics and Digital Participation

Social Media is transforming how people participate in the public sphere in terms of networked publics as described by Boyd (2010). Networked publics are digitally mediated public spheres, which allow geographically dispersed individuals to share a conversation, exchange ideas and create a community based on shared meanings. Additionally, networked publics are persistent, replicable, scalable and searchable; therefore, narratives can be easily spread throughout numerous communities.

Participants within this type of environment include cryptocurrency investors, mining advocates, environmentalists and policymakers who continually dialogue to shape a broader public's perception of economic development. Digital platforms provide an opportunity for certain narratives to gain traction. However, at the same time they expose those narratives to counter-narratives and alternative interpretations. Therefore, social media provides opportunities for democratic engagement but it also creates sites of competition among different interests to define the most legitimate interpretation of economic development.

Bennett & Segerberg (2012) further explain the dynamic of participating in a networked public through their theory of Connective Action. Unlike past models of action that relied heavily upon organisations or group identity, many modern digital movements rely on personalised forms of engagement facilitated by technology. Individuals participate in conversations because they feel a connection to the message, value or experience being promoted rather than due to organisational membership. Personalised action networks are particularly prevalent in cryptocurrency and environmental activist communities where individual members use digital platforms to individually amplify various narratives and maintain high levels of autonomy.

2.5 Agenda-Setting and Framing in Digital Communication

Media theories have several important ways to study the impact of digital stories on public conversations. The agenda-setting theory describes how media may influence the subject matter that people consider and/or care about. However, it also states that media do not typically influence what people believe or feel about those subjects. As such, the media can set the agenda for audiences by highlighting or de-emphasising various issues. In online communities, individuals and groups with large followings (i.e.,'influencers') help to establish public agendas regarding financial inclusion via digital currencies, environmental sustainability via responsible mining practices and effective government regulations.

Framing theory builds upon this approach by explaining how the way communicators portray issues will cause their audience to interpret them differently. Entman (1993) described framing as a process where communicators select specific aspects of reality and emphasise them so as to describe the problem(s), indicate who and what caused the issue, determine whose fault it was and ultimately recommend possible solutions. Importantly, framing is just as much about excluding information as including it. Communicators selectively choose to focus attention on certain features of reality while ignoring other features in order to construct a desired image of the world.

In terms of Africa's economic transformation, framing is especially relevant because numerous actors advance different visions for Africa's economic future. Digital currency supporters frequently frame digital currencies as a means to achieve greater financial inclusion, improve economic opportunities and reduce dependency on central authorities. On the other hand, detractors emphasise the lack of clear regulatory frameworks, price volatility and increased financial risks associated with cryptocurrencies. Similar frames exist around gold mining as well. Gold mining supporters often frame resource extraction as a source of economic growth and job creation while environmental organisations point out ecological damage, social inequality and poor governance. These differing frames demonstrate that people's perceptions of development are shaped through continuous communication battles and therefore, cannot be seen as simply reflective of the actual economic realities in question.

Collectively, these four theories (Self-Branding, Networked Publics, Connective Action, Agenda-Setting, and Framing) form an overarching theoretical structure for studying the role of digital communications in shaping conflicting stories about Africa's future economy. Rather than viewing digital currencies and gold mining as two separate industries, these theories view both as contested areas of discourse in which many different actors compete to shape public opinions, inform policy discussions and shape people's overall views of development. This theoretical base provides a framework for exploring how digital communications are changing the relationships between power, trust and economic authority in modern-day Africa.

3. Theoretical Framework

The approach for this research is to use a theoretical model that uses a combination of the approaches in Communication Studies, Media Studies and Critical Social Theory to understand the role social media plays in constructing conflicting views on African Economic Development. As opposed to looking at bitcoin and gold mining purely as technology or economics, the research will view these two forms of production as social constructs (discourses) that are used by various stakeholders in their efforts to define how they wish to develop Africa, who has authority over what can be developed, how sustainable development is defined and how financial power is distributed.

3.1 Self-Branding and Digital Authority

Social media have dramatically changed how people create authority by allowing them to build their own influence away from traditional systems. According to Khamis et al. (2017), individual influencers are able to generate a unique digital identity for themselves to be recognised in public through their authenticity, consistency and engagement with their audience. Therefore, they are not just creating content but they are also generating strategic public brand identities, which will continue to build their credibility based on interactions with their followers. Thus, the scope of an influencer's influence is not limited to advertising, as it can extend to areas such as sustainable finance and global development.

Similarly, Varoufakis (2016) suggests that today we live in a world where all things operate through visibility and branding, and that being recognised publicly is now a way of obtaining economic and symbolic wealth. Online advocates of cryptocurrency and those campaigning for sustainable futures compete against each other for recognition as authoritative figures who can interpret complex financial themes. As a result, constructing persuasive digital identities will ultimately determine whether or not one will be influential.

3.2 Connective Action and Networked Publics

The most common approaches in collective action have traditionally assumed that participants join together via formal organisations or share ideologies. However, Bennett & Segerberg (2012) argue that the rise of digital media has created an environment that enables 'connective' action. This form of action allows people to engage individually with social and political topics using social media. Therefore, instead of formally affiliating with other organisations, individuals can now engage with issues they feel personally connected to through sharing content related to those issues, expressing personal experiences related to them and engaging with others who express similar interests. Digital platforms therefore, enable people to organise themselves through personalised communications rather than hierarchical organisational systems.

Boyd's (2010) term "networked publics" also provides insight into this type of action. Boyd defines "networked publics" as publicly accessible digital environments where interactions occur through networked technologies. Within these environments, there are several key characteristics including: persistence, scalability, searchability and replicability. These features allow ideas to quickly spread across different networks, thus creating the potential for rapid circulation of narratives and enabling these narratives to be seen by large audiences, well beyond the local context(s) from where they originated. The combination of connective action and networked publics helps explain how geographically remote, politically disparate and culturally distinct individuals can come together through the medium of a shared narrative. Furthermore, both frameworks help us understand how individuals use digital platforms to build community and create shared meanings regarding emerging economic opportunities while at the same time subverting existing power structures and institutional authorities.

3.3 Agenda-Setting and Framing

The purpose of examining the ways in which certain narrative elements are given priority in digital communication is achieved through this research's utilisation of the theories of Agenda Setting and Framing. McCombs and Shaw (1972), claim that media have a significant impact on which issue audiences consider most important by focusing audience attention on specific topics. While Agenda Setting does not dictate an individual's opinion, it influences how audiences rank competing issues during public dialogue. Influencers, corporations, governments and activist groups create Agendas regarding financial innovations, sustainable practices and economic developments in digital spaces.

Agenda Setting is used with Entman's (1993) theory of Framing, which describes how communicators can define the way they view an issue, by emphasising one or more aspects of an issue. Frames identify a problem, attribute blame for the problem, give a moral evaluation of the problem and offer a solution to resolve the problem. Additionally, frames involve inclusion and exclusion. Communicators can emphasise some characteristics of an issue while de-emphasising others, thus creating their own version of reality whilst excluding other potential perspectives on the same issue. As such, framing plays a critical role in understanding differing views of economic development, sustainability and social responsibility regarding cryptocurrency and gold mining.

3.4 An Integrated Analytical Framework

In combination, these frameworks provide a single theoretical lens to analyse how digital communication contributes to the construction of economic narratives in Africa. The self-branding perspective explains how social media influencers create their own authority and credibility. Connective Action is used to explain how personalised digital interaction gives rise to forms of digital participation. Networked Publics describes the technological environment where such interactions take place while Agenda Setting and Framing theories describe what issue(s) are framed as important and worth being interpreted in public discourse.

Instead of viewing cryptocurrency and gold mining as individualised industries, the authors view each of them as two competing economic futures for Africa. Social media is therefore, one of the primary venues in which various stakeholders (governments, companies, influencers, entrepreneurs and activists) seek to legitimise different visions of economic growth, financial inclusion and sustainable development. Therefore, digital platforms serve as an arena in which questions of power, trust and legitimacy regarding who has authority over which vision of Africa's future continue to be negotiated. The proposed framework serves as the base from which subsequent analyses will explore how multiple competing digital narratives shape Africa's positioning with respect to a rapidly fragmenting world economic and political order.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative conceptual research design to investigate the contribution of social media to developing competing stories about digital finance, sustainable gold mining and development in Africa. The paper does not collect new empirical data. Instead, it develops an inter-disciplinary understanding of how digital communication constructs and circulates public narratives on competing models of development by synthesising previously published academic research and theoretical perspectives with relevant policy documents. Because this study aims to provide an interpretation of existing knowledge, find connections among various bodies of knowledge and contribute to advancing a theoretically-informed model that explains the communicative aspects of Africa's economic evolution (Creswell & Creswell, 2023), a qualitative conceptual design is suitable. Additionally, by combining concepts and theories from the fields of communication studies, media theory, digital finance and sustainable development, the paper will engage in a conceptual examination of how competing stories are created, disseminated and legitimised through current digital networks.

4.2 Data Sources

The research utilises an array of credible scholarly literature from peer-reviewed journals, along with applicable theoretical works as well as reputable policy documents to investigate the differing narratives that are developing regarding Africa's transition towards a more prosperous economic environment. As such, the authors have selected those academic resources from the disciplines of Communication Studies, Media Studies, Digital Finance, Sustainable Development and Political Economy in order to provide the analytic concepts for this paper. Additionally, the research utilised the reports produced by a number of different international organisations, most notably the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the African Development Bank (AfDB) and Chainalysis. These sources were selected due to their credibility, applicability to current issues of concern within both academia and public policy, as well as their contributions to these current debates. Furthermore, collectively these sources have provided the theoretical underpinnings and empirical context required to analyse how social media is creating competing narratives with regard to digital finance, sustainable gold mining and Africa's future prosperity.

4.3 Analytical Approach

The methodology used in this research involved conducting a thematic narrative synthesis of the selected literature (Braun and Clarke, 2021). In place of statistically comparing findings, the authors analysed a systematic sample of peer-reviewed articles, theory-based papers and government or organisation reports that have contributed to the understanding of cryptocurrency use, sustainable gold mining practices, social media usage, digital authority and African economic development. Comparative reviews of the selected studies enabled the researchers to find commonalities and differences among the themes associated with digital communications including financial inclusion, sustainability, governance, trust and economic development. The results of these comparative analyses were then incorporated into an integrated theoretical framework presented by the authors. The integrated theoretical framework includes aspects of self-branding, networked publics, connective actions, agenda setting and framing. The integrated theoretical framework is what enables the authors to analyse how digital communication may contribute to developing public perceptions of Africa's emerging economic future.

4.4 Limitations

This study was conceptual and did not include primary empirical data. Thus, the results were dependent upon synthesising and interpreting existing academic literature, theoretical scholarship and policy reports, but not directly collecting and analysing social media content or views from stakeholders. Although this type of work can provide an interdisciplinary overview of the issues being studied, it cannot reflect the many diverse types of stories, interactions or contextually-based experiences present in each country in Africa, platform for social media use or community of users. Research based on this conceptual framework can be undertaken to examine these aspects of African contexts through empirical studies using methods such as qualitative content analysis, thematic analysis or critical discourse analysis of social media, and interviews with those who develop policies and regulations related to digital finance, those representing the industries that promote digital finance, and those with large social media followings who promote digital finance.

5. Discussion

5.1 Financial Empowerment through Cryptocurrency

Cryptocurrency use continues to grow rapidly in Africa, due to the larger transformation taking place within the structure of Africa's financial systems. Although most people view cryptocurrency primarily as an innovation in technology, it can also be seen as a response to long-standing issues with Africa's economy such as, financial exclusion, inflation, unstable currencies and high cost of international money transfers. As a result of this, cryptocurrency has been related to stories of empowerment, decentralisation and financial freedom.

Social Media has played a major role in developing these stories. Many cryptocurrency influencers have developed the idea that cryptocurrency provides individuals with options to create financial democracy by providing them with the ability to opt out of using banks and to make personal decisions regarding managing your wealth. These ideas are presented to audiences via YouTube Channels, Podcasts and Online Communities. Digital Entrepreneurs who promote blockchain-based business models see the creation of blockchain technology as the primary means by which previously financially disenfranchised communities will gain access to traditional forms of economic participation.

In many parts of Africa there continue to be disparities in regards to having access to formal banking. However, the narratives being promoted provide oversimplified versions of what is a complex reality. There are many ways that cryptocurrencies could provide some form of access to additional forms of financial services. However, users are also exposed to various levels of risk when investing in cryptocurrencies (i.e., market volatility, lack of regulatory oversight, etc.). Therefore, the concept of creating a more empowered citizenry through access to digital assets and increased opportunities for financial self-determination exists in conjunction with other narratives that highlight the potential for citizens to incur financial vulnerabilities while making investments in digital assets.

The two competing ideologies represent different interpretations on how social construction occurs based upon digital communication as it relates to financial innovation. Influencers, Entrepreneurs, Regulators and Financial Institutions continually debate and argue whether digital assets represent liberation from traditional financial structures or if they pose a threat to financial stability.

5.2 Resource Development through Sustainable Gold Mining

Mining continues to be a vital area in which many countries are developing their economic development plans. Mining gold is a major industry on the continent with the potential to provide jobs, export revenue and attract foreign investment to various African economies. Often, governments portray mining as a key part of their overall development strategy emphasising that mining contributes to both economic development and improving national infrastructure.

The growth of the mining sector in Africa is now facing increased scrutiny over its impact on the environment (sustainability), issues of social justice and corporate accountability. While public debate about mining is primarily focused on how much profit can be made from extracting natural resources, it also includes issues such as protecting biodiversity, displacing local communities due to mining operations, fair labor practices and ensuring that all parties involved in the extraction process are held accountable for their actions.

In addition to traditional sources of information about mining, these debates are becoming more apparent through digital communications. Environmental organisations, local communities impacted by mining activities, mining companies themselves and government officials are using online platforms to advance competing interpretations of what constitutes "sustainable" mining. Often, mining companies promote their own view of being environmentally responsible through technological innovations, community investments and corporate social responsibility programs. At the same time, environmental advocates argue that mining operations lead to ecological destruction, unequal wealth distribution and failed governance. Thus, this competition demonstrates that "sustainable mining" is emerging as a communicative problem, as well as an operational challenge.

Ultimately, rather than merely seeing mining as a commodity extraction activity, recent debates frame it in terms of larger questions about the future of African development. Therefore, while policymakers will need to find a balance between promoting economic growth and protecting the environment, they will also need to navigate competing narratives presented publicly about sustainable mining that affect both domestic support and legitimacy along with external investment confidence.

5.3 Influencers Constructing Competing Visions of Development

Social media has completely changed who participates in debate about what Africa's future will be economically. Formerly authoritative sources such as governments, financial institutions and major news organisations now have an equal footing with influencers, digital entrepreneurs, activists and individual content producers whose followers can far exceed traditional institutions. The primary difference between these types of influencers is not merely that they disseminate information but also create a narrative by which their audience views economic change. Influencers for cryptocurrency are particularly vocal on how decentralised, entrepreneurial and financially free the future of Africa digitally will be. Conversely, sustainability advocates emphasise environmental stewardship, socially conscious investments, sustainable resource management as essential elements to creating a sustainable economy. This dichotomy clearly illustrates that development is becoming a contested communicative definition.

Furthermore, the ability of digital influencers to utilise audience participation contributes significantly to their levels of digital influence. Audiences provide comments, create other forms of content like reaction videos, participate in online discussions etc., that ultimately serve to reinforce certain narratives. Connective Action (Bennett & Segerberg) is helpful in explaining the mechanism behind this activity and how loosely affiliated individuals are able to organise themselves based on common values regardless of formal affiliation. Networked Publics (Benkler) further explain how quickly and easily narratives can travel from one location to another and thus allow for localised debates to gain global attention.

As a result of these dynamics economic development is being negotiated in real-time through digital channels. Digital channels determine which perspectives receive visibility, engagement and algorithmic amplification and thereby gain prominence. Therefore, economic development is communicated, interpreted and legitimised through real time digital negotiations among multiple different digital stakeholders as opposed to solely government or academically defined policy.

5.4 Power, Trust and Digital Authority

The underlying debates around cryptocurrency and sustainable mining will likely lead to larger conversations about what it means to hold “power” and “authority”. The way that we interact digitally has disrupted many of the traditional ways in which people derive authority, credibility and influence from other people. In today’s world, people can develop their own authority without needing to get recognised by institutions. As such, when people consider whether or not to trust someone online, they do so based on their perception of that person's authenticity. For example by questioning how honest they are or by testing their ability to engage with them directly over time.

As digital communication environments continue to evolve, the way in which people negotiate authority becomes an interactive process. Online influencers demonstrate their authority to users through continued storytelling, consistency and interaction. Users themselves determine the credibility of those who claim authority over them by continuing to participate with them. In addition to creating new forms of authority and accountability for participants in social media ecosystems, agenda-setting and framing mechanisms reinforce these processes. Agenda-setting refers to how information receives exposure within our public environment. Similarly, Framing refers to how that exposed information gets interpreted. For example, cryptocurrency might be seen as a form of financial empowerment for some individuals or as speculative risk for others. Similarly, mining might be portrayed as sustainable development for some or as environmental degradation for others. Regardless of how either issue is portrayed, these frames will ultimately impact not just individual attitudes towards issues of interest, but also investment decisions, regulatory discussions and policy priorities. Therefore, if one views "power" primarily as institutional control and/or political authority, then power will no longer be viewed as operating solely through institutional control and/or political authority. Power will now operate increasingly through discourse. Therefore, individuals and organisations capable of developing a dominant narrative will define both the problem(s) being addressed economically and the legitimacy of potential solution(s), thereby determining the type(s) of development model(s) that receive widespread public support. As such, digital communications represent a critical area where economic authority is developed, contested and re-negotiated.

5.5 Implications for African Policy

The findings of this paper indicate that in addition to the technological and administrative challenges involved in regulating access to resources and technology, developing countries have been forced into a new era of decision-making regarding how they can influence the rapidly changing digital environment in which stories about their own developmental trajectories are told at speeds never before seen. Therefore, it is likely that policies related to cryptocurrency, innovative financial services and sustainable mining will fail if they do not address the social communication aspects of these phenomena as well as its legal and economic ramifications. Governments need to recognise that social media has become one of the most important forums for influencing economic governance. Therefore the successful implementation of regulatory approaches in this field must include transparency in all communications, financial education on how to use digital finance appropriately and participation in the discourse with online communities to achieve changes in behaviours based on laws and regulations alone.

Public institutions need to develop stronger relationships with organisations such as schools, universities, private sector players (such as those operating in the digital space) and civil society to increase awareness among the general population about the potential benefits and hazards of emerging technologies and resource developments.

Mining policy should be developed further along lines other than just fulfilling the obligations required by environmental law. Greater transparency and better communication practices with stakeholders including governments, mining companies, local populations and digital participants in online communities would help build trust in the sustainability of mining projects. Trust building would best occur when there is a two-way conversation between all parties interested in mining activities and this includes having evidence to support claims made by governments, mining companies etc.

This study demonstrates why interdisciplinary approaches to policymaking are so essential. The future of Africa's economic development depends on finding ways to combine technological innovation with good practice in resource governance and effective digital communication strategies. In turn, developing countries' policymakers need to accept that what determines whether a country develops economically cannot simply be measured by how fast or effectively a country performs economically but equally importantly by how societies tell the story of how economic opportunity, progress and sustainability come about.

6. Conclusion

Africa's economic transformation is increasingly shaped by interaction between technological innovation, natural resource development and digital communication. Although digital finance and extractive industries have often been examined independently of each other, this paper has argued that both are embedded within broader struggles over how Africa's future development is imagined, communicated and legitimised.

Cryptocurrency and sustainable gold mining represent two distinct yet interconnected pathways towards economic growth. Each is accompanied by competing narratives concerning empowerment, sustainability, governance and social responsibility. Drawing upon theories of self-branding, connective action, networked publics, agenda setting and framing, this paper demonstrates that social media has become a significant arena in which these competing visions are constructed and contested. Influencers, entrepreneurs, corporations, governments and activists no longer simply disseminate information. Rather, they actively shape public understanding through framing economic opportunities, defining development priorities and influencing perceptions of legitimacy and trust. Therefore, authority is increasingly negotiated through digital visibility, audience engagement and networked participation rather than relying exclusively on traditional institutional expertise. Additionally, the analysis suggests that Africa's repositioning within an evolving global economy cannot be understood solely through technological adoption or resource extraction. Instead, economic development is simultaneously a communicative process in which narratives influence investment decisions, regulatory debates and public expectations. As the growing importance of digital platforms means that power increasingly operates through discourse, diverse actors can compete for influence over how development challenges and opportunities are interpreted. Recognising the communicative dimension is essential to understanding the relationship between policy, practice and economic transformation across the continent.

From a policy perspective the findings suggest that effective governance requires more than regulatory intervention. Policymakers must also strengthen digital literacy, improve public communication and foster transparent engagement with citizens and stakeholders. Additionally, organisations operating within both the financial technology and mining sectors should recognise that long-term legitimacy depends not only on economic performance but also on credibility, accountability and sustained public trust.

This study offers an interdisciplinary framework for examining the relationship between digital communication and economic development in Africa. By bringing together insights from communication studies, media theory, digital finance and sustainable resource management it contributes to emerging debates concerning power, policy and practice in a disrupted global environment. Future research could extend this work through empirical investigation of social media content, influencer networks and audience engagement across different countries in Africa.

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DOES TRUST MATTER FOR ENTREPRENEURSHIP? INSTITUTIONAL TRUST, DISTRUST AND ENTREPRENEURIAL RESILIENCE IN AFRICAN-OWNED BUSINESSES

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Abstract

Trust has long been recognised as a criticalfactor in entrepreneurial activity, influencing access to resources, networks, information, and institutional support.However, less attentionhas been paid to the simultaneous role of distrust and the ways in which entrepreneurs operate within environments characterised by uncertainty, exclusion, or limited confidence in formal institutions. This paper explores the significance of institutional trust and distrust in shaping entrepreneurial resilience among African-owned businesses. Drawing on the mixed-embeddedness and institutional theory literature, the paper examines how perceptions of trust and distrust towards formal institutions, including financial institutions, regulatory bodies, and support agencies, influence entrepreneurial decision-making, business continuity, and adaptation strategies. It argues that while institutional trust can facilitate business growth and opportunity recognition, institutional distrust may also serve as a catalyst for resilience by encouraging entrepreneurs to develop alternative networks, informal support mechanisms, and innovative coping strategies. Using evidence from African-owned businesses and insightsderived from rich qualitative data, the study investigates the complex relationship between trust, distrust, and entrepreneurial resilience within a dynamic socio-economic environment. It further explores how trust and distrust, both within African minority communities and in their interactions with wider society, influence business creation, growth, and sustainability. The findings contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of entrepreneurship by demonstrating that resilience is shaped not only by the presence of trust but also by entrepreneurs' ability to navigate and respond to distrust. The paper offers important implications for policymakers, business support organisations, and entrepreneurial development programmes seeking to promote inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystems. By highlighting the dual role of trust and distrust, the study contributes to ongoing debates on entrepreneurship, institutional engagement, and resilience in an increasingly disrupted and uncertain world.

Keywords: *Institutional Trust, Entrepreneurial Resilience, Distrust, African DiasporaEntrepreneurship and Mixed Embeddedness*

Introduction and Background

Entrepreneurship is the process of identifying, assessing, and taking advantage of chances to bring new products and services, organisational techniques, markets, processes, and raw resources through previously unorganised efforts, according to Shane and Venkataraman (2000) and Venkataraman (1997). In entrepreneurship research, Shane and Venkataraman's comprehensive definition (2000) has gainedconsiderable recognition in entrepreneurship studies(Baron & Shane, 2008). This concept guides scholarly research into what, by whom, and with what opportunities affects the processes and outcomes involved in the identification, evaluation, and exploitation to creäte future goods and services. Entrepreneurship often serves as a means for individuals to overcome barriers and achievesocial mobility (Mickiewicz et al., 2019). This is particularly true for immigrants, who may face discrimination and limited opportunities in traditional employment settings. Given that Black Africanentrepreneurship and the larger area of businessare intertwined, it is impossible to discussed ethnic minority entrepreneurship independently.

In recent years, UK has witnessed an increase unprecedented migration from different countries resulting in UK as ‘super-diverse’ nation (Vertovec, 2007), which is partly caused by globalization and expansion of the European Union (Drinkwater & Robinson, 2016). This is due to the coexistence of established ethnic minority groups and recent immigration, as noted by scholars such as Vertovec (2007), Sepulveda et al. (2011), and Daniel et al. (2019). The surge in migration in the UK is due to several factors, such as heightened net migration, a more diverse array of countries of origin, and diverse migration opportunities, encompassing economic migration and asylum-seeking. Along with this flow is also anincrease in entrepreneurial activities among ethnic minorities (Gbadamosi, 2012). These Ethnic Minority Businesses (EMBs), encompassing businesses owned and managed by ethnic minorities, have experienced significant growth, particularly among African communities due to rising immigration (Mekonn, 2018). Gbadamosi (2015) reports that there are over 10,000black-owned businesses in London and over 24,000Black people are self-employed, as African businesses have also increased considerably. This uniqueand vibrant s environment presents an excellent opportunity to research migrant entrepreneurship. However, the vast majority of the research conducted to date has focused on Asian minorities, including those of Chinese,Indian, and Pakistani descent (Jones et al., 1992; Storey,1994; Ram et al., 2017; Ojo, 2021), with inadequate attention given to individuals of African and Caribbean descent, particularly those of Black origin, and their views have been under-represented (Daley, 1998; Ram, Jones, & Villares-Varela, 2017; Omeihe, 2019; Amoako, 2019; Simba et al., 2023).

Challenges of AfricanMinority Entrepreneurs

There has been limited studies on other racial or ethnic minority groups, for instance, African minority entrepreneurs and theireconomic activities have received less attention than other visible ethnic minority groups in the UK (Daley, 1998; Nwankwo, 2005; Ojo, 2019, 2021). There is no doubt that African businesses contribute significantly to the UK economy (Johnson, 2000), create job opportunities, and boost prosperity (Bawden, 2011), but few black African entrepreneurs interviewed in London demonstrate the opportunity for growth, despite numerous business challenges that exceedsize, culture, and historical legacy.African businesses continueto excel and run sustainably in numerous sectors, especially in these seven industries (Real estate, renting, business services, entertainment, wholesale, and wholesale retail trade). Their contribution to the UK economy is substantial, with estimates ranging from £25 billion to £32 billion annually (Mekonn, 2018). Given the above evidence, it is surprising that little researchattention focuses on African minority entrepreneurship, and more importantly, their lived experience. Despite these significant contributions that these African entrepreneurs make to both the economy and society of the UK, there has been a lack of research on the uniquechallenges they face. Challenges arising from super- diversity, whichare often overlooked by policymakers in the UK, as well as the public and the broader business community (Terjesen et al., 2016; Kaperová et al., 2022).Despite structural and systemic gaps, evidence suggests that African immigrants are more than five times more likely to be involved in autonomous business start-ups than their white domestic counterparts (Nwankwo et al., 2011). For example, the Access Report (2024) highlights that minority entrepreneurs often rely heavilyon external fundingto pursue their entrepreneurial goals, in comparison to their non-minority counterparts.

Nonetheless, there are significant concernsamong African entrepreneurs about unfair and unequal treatment. This breeds distrust and seems to be the main cause of increased levels of discouragement, which has a rippleeffect on the economy of the UnitedKingdom as a whole. For ethnic minority businesses (EMBs) to attain their full capacity for growth, financeproviders need to address both current and apparent obstacles to financing and account for their relationships with them. African minority entrepreneurs (AMEs) face comparable difficulties, such as bad credit history and a poor financial history that is connected to creditworthiness are other barriers to obtaining bank funding. Accessingfinancial institutions and related supportservices in person has become increasingly challenging due to the closureof traditional bank offices in numerous inner- city areas and the transition to remote banking. Several AMEs are discouragedfrom applying for and getting funds by these issues, which are made worse by the pandemic. One of the main challenges that keep many AMEs from engaging with regulatory supportand financial institutions is a persistent lack of trust and distrust in formal institutions. Many factors, both present and perceived, contribute to the high levels of distrust.

The Concept of Trust

Trust, an abstract concept with no single definition, is recognised as a lubricating mechanism for relationships, has received growing attention in recent years. Literature suggests that trust is a burning issue in entrepreneurship, SMES, and trade of different kinds in developing countries. Trust is the backbone of our livesand is an essential componentof human relationships. Defining trust has been challenging because of its complexity, resulting in various interpretations due to a lack of consensus among scholars. according to (Zucker1986), it is a sharedexpectation between two people in a relationship. It also includes calculus-based trust, where individuals accept vulnerability in their relationships, and relational trust, which develops through mutual understanding and interaction (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996; Rousseau et al., 1998). Mollering's (2006) defined trust as a reflexive process of building on reason, routine and reflexivity thereby suspending all uncertainties and social vulnerabilities by maintaining a positive expectation towards the intentions of the otherparty. Similarly, evidencefrom scholarly researchreminds us that trust includes the intention to accept vulnerabilities based on the positive expectations of the other party (Rousseau et al., 1998; Misztal, 1996; Blomqvist, 2002). The persistent lack of trust, both present and perceived, in turn contributes to high levels of distrust, which is one of the main challenges that keep many African entrepreneurs from engaging with regulatory support and financial institutions and has a ripple effect on the economy of the UnitedKingdom as a whole. This leads to distrust and seems to be the main cause of increased levels of discouragement and unwillingness to apply for loans from banks (Fairlie and Robb, 2010). Their reluctance to seek bank funding is often based on the expectation of receiving unfavourable treatment from lenders (Fraser et al., 2009).Distrust, which stems from negativeexpectations of what may be obtainable, acts as a signal of fear to protect oneselffrom the potential effects of such occurrences (Tomlinson and Lewicki, 2006; Kramer and Lewicki, 2010). The purpose of this study is to investigate the importance of trust and distrust among African minority entrepreneurship, and how they are affected by many challenges and issues. Research shows that most of these entrepreneurs now look for alternative ways to survive and one of the keyways they use to survive is by looking at the role of Trust. This paper presents an opportunity to address this research gap. The study gives an exploratory piece on African minority entrepreneurial dynamics in the West Midlands. Thus, against this background, this study presents an opportunity to addressthis research gap through empiricalresearch by investigating the importance of trust and distrustamong (AMEs) and their perception of formal institutions, using the concepts of type of trust, trust violation, and trust repair.

The study presents an opportunity to investigate and gives an exploratory piece on African minority entrepreneurial dynamics in the West Midlands. Research shows that most of these entrepreneurs now look for alternative ways to survive,and one of the keywaysthey use to survive is by looking at the role of Trust.Thus, against this background, this paper seeks to address these research gaps through empirical research by investigating the importance of trust and distrust among AME, and how they are affected by various challenges, issues and their perception of formal institutions, using the conceptsof type of trust, trust violation, and trust repair.This study asks two key sub-questions. Specifically, F*irst,*
What role does institutional trust play in shaping entrepreneurial resilience among African-owned businesses? Secondly, how do African-owned business owners respond to and manage institutional trust and distrust in their entrepreneurial journeys? The paper addresses these research gaps and contributes by examining the interplay of Trust and Distrust in lived experience of African MinorityEntrepreneurs on the bases of their business start-up decision, survival, sustainability and conceptual mapping of various stances through participation in in-depth interviewing methodologies.

Theoretical Framework

To achieve this purpose, this research appliesa general approachthat relies on the complementary perspectives of mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman, 2010) and institutional logic (Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Omeihe, 2023) to empirically interrogate the contexts in which African entrepreneurs are situated. The theoretical lens, developed by Kloosterman et al. (1999), acknowledges the specific resources and market accessavailable to minoritybusinesses due to their dual embeddedness in their ethnic communities and the broader societal context. The mixed embeddedness theory investigates how entrepreneurs are shaped by their socio-economic and political-institutional contexts, affecting their business opportunities (Dana, 2007). The theoretical lens of Mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman, 2010) and institutional logic developed by Kloosterman et al. (1999), acknowledges the specific resources and market access available to EMBs due to their dual embeddedness in their ethnic communities and the broader societal context.While some arguethat the conceptleans towards structural determinism (Sepulveda et al., 2011), it remains crucial to understand how EMBs navigate their contextual setting to access resources and markets. This is particularly relevant in light of new economic sociology's distinction between embeddedness and mixed embeddedness (Kloosterman and Rath,2001). Traditional views on embeddedness, such as those ofPolanyi (1944) and Granovetter (1985), focused on the influence of socialstructures and personalnetworks on economicbehaviour. Kloosterman and his colleagues have built upon the concepts proposed by Polanyi and Granovetter, devising a framework that evaluates the myriad contextual factors influencing ethnic entrepreneurs, which includes aspects like community, market dynamics, and regulatory frameworks. The mixed embeddedness theory investigates how entrepreneurs are shaped by their socio-economic and political-institutional contexts, affecting their business opportunities (Dana, 2007). It offers a comprehensive perspective, positioning ethnic minority businesses within the extensive structures that surround them (Ram and Smallbone, 2001).

Mixed-Embeddedness Theory

The mixed embeddedness framework posits that firms operate within three spheres. The microsphere encompasses ethnic resources accessible through social networks within co-ethnic populations (Jones et al., 2014). The mesosphere considers the broader opportunity structure necessary for survival beyond the co-ethnic community. Finally, the macrosphere focuses on political-legal regulations (Kloosterman, 2010). This distinction between micro and mesosphere lies in the prioritisation of kinship and co-ethnic identity within the community. This often leads to reliance on these social networks for market opportunities and production inputs, given the challenges faced by ethnic minority entrepreneurs in accessing conventional financial resources (Jones et al., 2014; Patel, 1991; Kloosterman et al., 1999).

Institutional Logic Theory

A key objectiveof this research is to provide a richer understanding by drawing on an institutional theory framework to address the complex phenomenon of trust in AME networks. Douglass North's work on institutional theory in his vein, divides institutions into formal and informal categories, and examineshow institutions have been useful.The study adoptstrust as embeddedin social norms and networks (Jackand Anderson, 2002;Lyon, 2000). Notably,there exists a complex relationship between African minority entrepreneurs and their institutional context. Institutional theory asserts that both organisations and individuals conform to established norms, values, and regulations within a given institutional environment, shedding light on how migrantsnavigate and respond to the myriadformal and informalconstraints imposed by the host country's institutions (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). African Minority entrepreneurs often find themselves grappling with various institutional challenges, ranging from legal barriers and cultural differences to discriminatory practices. Thesechallenges significantly influence their business strategies, decision- making processes, and overall entrepreneurial behaviour (Welter et al., 2015; Dorcas et al., 2021).

For a comprehensive understanding, institutional theoryexamines the ways migrant entrepreneurs either adhereto or deviate from established business norms in the host country. This examination extends to critical aspects such as business registration, legal compliance, and the dynamics of relationships with regulatory bodies (Welter et al., 2015; Daniel et al., 2019).

However, Scholarly research now questions what they do not know about institutions. Thornton and Ocasio have introduced a new aspect of institutional logic theory, which focuses on the cultural aspect that is often overlooked by institutional theory.(Thornton and Ocasio,1999; Omeihe, 2023) Institutional logic is applied to empirically interrogate the contexts in which African minority entrepreneurs are situated. An institution can be broadly understood as a set of established social structures comprising norms, rules, and shared beliefs that guide and regulate human interaction and behaviour withina society (Scott,2014). Institutions providestability and meaningto social life byshaping how individuals and organisations behave,make decisions, and pursue economicgoals. They include both formal institutions, such as laws, policies, and regulatory frameworks, and informal institutions, such ascultural values, traditions, and social norms(North, 1990). Together, these institutional elements influence how economic activities are organised, how markets function, and how individuals navigate opportunities and constraints within their environments. Institutional theory examines how these structures shape social and economic behaviour. Douglass North's (1990) seminalwork argues that institutions are the "rules of the game" that structure incentives in human exchange, thereby enabling or restricting economic performance. Formal institutions like property rights, contracts, and political systems tend to provide clarity and enforceability, while informal institutions such as trust, kinship, or cultural expectations operate throughsocial sanctions and shared understandings. Both dimensions are crucial: formal institutions may reduce uncertainty and transaction costs, whereas informal institutions can either complement or undermine formal systems, especially in contexts where governance is weak.

Institutional Logic theoryprovides a powerfullens through whichto understand entrepreneurship as a socially embedded process shaped by formal and informal rules, norms, and belief systems (Scott, 2014). Rather than viewing entrepreneurship solely as an individual or economic pursuit, institutional theory recognised that entrepreneurial behaviour is deeply influenced by the institutional environment in which it occurs. Institutions, whether regulatory, normative, or cognitive, define what forms of business activity are considered legitimate, feasible, and desirable (Bruton et al., 2010). In the context of entrepreneurship, formal institutions include government policies, business regulations, property rights, and access to financial systems that either facilitate or constrain entrepreneurial entryand growth. Informalinstitutions, on the other hand, encompass trust,social norms, cultural values, and community expectations that shape how entrepreneurs interact with others, access resources, and build credibility (North, 1990).

Methodology

To achieve our aim, the use of qualitative methods and the abductive approach is adopted in this study. the study used an extensive interpretive approach, which is based on how paradigm underpins the necessityof the researcher to understand the differences betweenhumans as social actors. Data will be collected through semi-structured interviews and observations of 42 owners/managers of African immigrant businesses in the West Midlands. A case study strategy choice to address this study's research questions, the approach is to retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events(Yin, 2014; Omeihe,2019; 2023), especially as it relates to the local interpretations of the issues and challenges facing the actors will be selected for this study. The use of abductive approach will be adopted in this study; the researcher adopts a phenomenological strategy. This approach assumes that understanding socially constructed and individually perceived reality necessitates examining the unfolding process by which it is formed. Rooted in phenomenology (interpretivism), this research approachaims to understand the essence of individuals' everyday experiences with reality from their subjective perspective (Moustakas, 1994). For this research, the sampling technique enabling the collection of data will be purposive sampling. Data analysiswill be thematicanalysis, to identifyrelevant themes, and organize data to fully understand the decision-making processes of the owners/managers (Braun and Clarke,2006). Ethical considerations in this studywill demonstrate high-level appropriate conduct of behaviour, it will adopt a set of criteriaestablished for ensuringmethodological rigour (Omeihe,2019), which will include credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Potential Findings and Implications

This developmental paper aims to highlight the importance of trust in challenging situations. The findings will be presented through a series of personal experiences that illustrate how West Midlands-based immigrant entrepreneurs can benefit from their trust in various alternative network structures, such as family, trade groups, religious organisations, and cultural institutions. The anticipated outcome is to take a contextual approach to understanding the significance of trust while also supporting the growing emphasis on researchin the West Midlands that focuses on the trust and distrust relationships of African minority entrepreneurs. This research paper aims to prompt practical implications drawn from the experiences of West Midlands African minority entrepreneurs. A related implication will be that the study will highlightthe significance of trust-based immigrant relationships, thereby providing valuable insights for future research, which is believed has received insufficient coverage. This includes acknowledging the positiveand negative aspects of trust, exploring the interdependencies between different forms of trust, and gaining a better understanding of the complexities of trust and its contextual interactions in entrepreneurial activities. Future research to be undertaken for this study would seek to examine to what extent access to finance is a significant barrier, with studies showing that immigrant entrepreneurs are more likely to face credit application denialscompared to their white counterparts. More broadly, how perceived discrimination can lead to discouragement, emphasizing the need for better engagement and information flow between banks and ethnic minority entrepreneurs. Finally, political interventions must also be careful not to exacerbate market failures or choose to ignore the varying barriers faced by African entrepreneurs. Investigating these barriers can pave the way for the growth and development of African immigrant businesses, contributing positively to the economy.

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INSTITUTIONAL INVESTORS AS CATALYSTS FOR COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT IN EMERGING MARKETS: A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW AND FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA

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Abstract

Commercial real estate (CRE) plays a critical role in economicgrowth by supporting business expansion, employment generation, urban development, and infrastructure investment. In emerging markets, however, inadequate long-term financing remains a significant barrier to sustainable commercial property development. Institutional investors including pensionfunds, insurance companies, sovereign wealth funds, asset management firms, and Real Estate Investment Trusts (REITs) have increasingly become important providers of patient capital capable of addressing this financing gap. Despite their growing importance, evidence on the factors influencing institutional investment in commercial real estate remains fragmented, particularly within emergingeconomies such as Nigeria. This paper synthesises evidence from a systematic literature review of 45 peer-reviewed studies published between 2020 and 2025 to examine how institutional investors influence commercial real estate funding, using Lagos State as the primary contextual focus. The reviewidentifies the principal drivers of institutional investment, including regulatory quality, market transparency, macroeconomic stability, financial market development, governance, and infrastructure. It also highlights persistent barriers such as policy uncertainty, information asymmetry, weak legal institutions, and underdeveloped capital markets that continue to constrain institutional capital mobilisation. Building upon these findings, the paper proposes an Integrated Institutional Investment Framework illustrating the interaction between regulatory institutions, market conditions, investor confidence, and commercial real estate performance. The paper concludes by discussing policy implications and future research priorities aimed at strengthening institutional investment participation across emerging markets. The study contributes to the literature by providing a concise synthesis of contemporary evidence while offering a conceptual foundation for future empirical research.

Keywords: *Institutional Investors; Commercial Real Estate; Emerging Markets; Lagos State; Investment Funding; Systematic Literature Review; REITs.*

1.INTRODUCTION

The commercial real estate sector plays a pivotal role in economic development, particularly in emerging marketswhere institutional investors are increasingly shapinginvestment patterns and market dynamics (Nebolisa & Udobi, 2024). This systematic literature review examines the impact of institutional investors on investment funding in commercial real estate, with specific focus on factors relevant to Lagos, Nigeria. The review synthesizes recent empirical evidence to establish a theoretical and contextual foundation for understanding how institutional investors influence capital allocation, market efficiency, and development patterns in commercial property sectors.

Institutional investors, including pension funds, insurance companies, asset management firms, and real estate investment trusts (REITs), possess vast financial resources and long-term investmentoutlooks that enablethem to engagein large-scale real estate development projects (Magnani & Sanfelici, 2023). Their involvement often enhances market stability by providing consistent funding sources and encouraging adherence to global best practices in real estate management (Li et al., 2022). Moreover, their presence increases market competitiveness by introducing innovative financing structures such as syndicated loans, structured debt, and public-private partnerships that expand capital availability and enable transformative urban development projects (Aziz et al., 2024).

In Nigeria's commercial real estate sector,particularly in Lagos State; the nation's financial and commercial hub, institutional investors play an increasingly crucial role in shaping market trends, influencing investment funding patterns, and determining overall development trajectories (Nebolisa & Udobi, 2024). Lagos attracts substantial investment from both domestic and international institutional investors due to its strategic economic importance, expanding urban landscape, and position as the gateway to West Africa's largest economy (Bello et al., 2021). However, despite the potential benefits of institutional participation, several challenges hinder optimal performance. This includes the regulatory bottlenecks, market volatility, limited transparency in property transactions, and infrastructural deficiencies (de Bruin, 2023; Makata & Udobi, 2024).

While previous studies have analyzed real estate financing mechanisms and investment performance in Nigeria, limited research specifically examines how institutional investors influence capital allocation, investment returns, and market efficiency in the c ommercial property sector (Ahiadu et al., 2024; Ugwuejim & Otegbulu, 2024), the role of institutional investors in shaping investment funding and development trends in Lagos remains underexplored in academic literature. This systematic review seeks to bridge this gap by evaluating empirical evidence on institutional investment determinants, strategies, challenges, and impacts in commercial real estate contexts relevant to emergingmarkets. By synthesizing recent scholarly work published between 2020 and 2025, this review provides a current and comprehensive understanding of how institutional investors operate in commercial real estate markets, the factors influencing their investment decisions, and the implications for market development and policy formulation in contexts similar to Lagos, Nigeria.

2. SYSTEMATIC LITERATURE REVIEW (SLR) METHODOLOGY

A traditional literature review provides a narrative summary and critical analysis of existing research on a given topic, whereas a systematic literature review employs a more rigorous, transparent, and replicable methodology to comprehensively evaluateprior scholarship (Fan et al., 2022). The SLR approach represents a cornerstone of evidence-based research, offering structured protocols for identifying, selecting, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of knowledge (Yusif & Hafeez-Baig, 2024). This methodological rigor minimizes bias and enhances objectivity through explicit criteria and systematic procedures (Johnson et al., 2020). This systematic review adopts a structured five-stage framework encompassing question formulation, literature location, study selection and evaluation, analysis and synthesis, and reporting of findings, ensuring comprehensive coverage of institutional investment in commercial real estate within emerging market contexts as shown in Figure 1.

Question Formulation

The first step of an in-depth SLR is to address well-specified, informative and clearly defined research questions (Islam & Beloucif, 2024). Alvessonand Sandberg (2024) argue that clearly formulated research questions avoid ambiguity and develop a clear focus. The overall aim of this systematic literature review is to comprehensively synthesize peer-reviewed journal literature to identifyand analyze the impact of institutional investors on investment funding in Lagos' commercial real estate sector. Specifically, this review seeks to examine the extent of institutional investorcontributions, their investment strategies and decision-making processes, the challenges they face, the influence of regulatory frameworks, and potential policy interventions that can enhancetheir participation. By systematically reviewing recent empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025, this review provides insights into current research trajectories and proposes new avenues for future investigation.

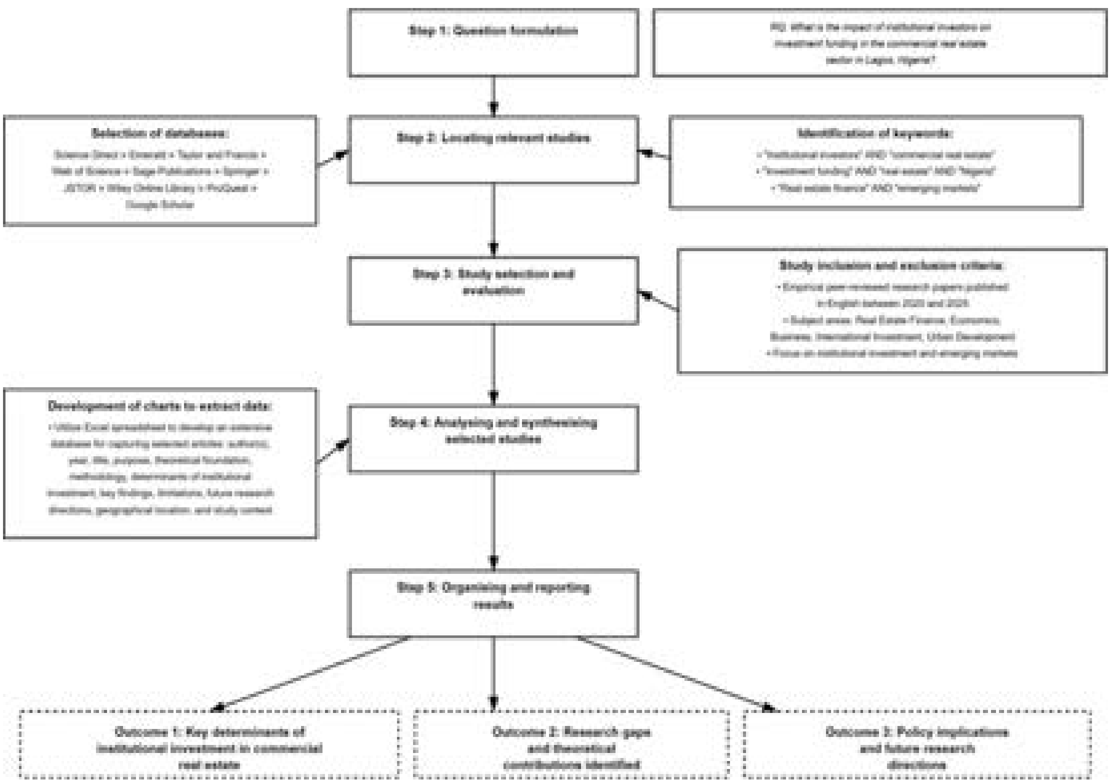

Figure 1: Steps of SLR Methodology Adopted

Hence, this systematic literaturereview addresses the following five research questions:

RQ1. What is the extent of institutional investors' contribution to commercial real estate funding?
The first research questionseeks to establish the magnitude and nature of institutional investor participation in commercial real estate financing. This question aims to identify empirical evidence regarding the volume of capital deployedby institutional investors, their market share relative to other funding sources, and the types of commercial properties they target. Understanding the extent of institutional contribution is fundamental to assessing their overall impact on market development and provides a baselinefor evaluating their significance in real estate ecosystems, particularly in emerging market contexts similar to Lagos.

RQ2. What investment strategies and decision-making processes do institutional investors employ in commercial real estate markets?
The second research question focuses on understanding how institutional investors approach commercial real estate investment. This question examines the strategic frameworks institutional investors utilize, including asset allocation methodologies, risk assessment procedures, due diligence practices, and portfolio construction approaches. Additionally, it explores the decision-making criteria that guide investment selections, such as return expectations, risk tolerance levels, investment horizons, and market entry strategies. Insights from this question will reveal the sophistication of institutional investment approaches and identify best practices applicable to emerging markets.

RQ3. What are the challenges and risks associated with institutional investment in commercial real estate?
The third researchquestion investigates the obstacles and risk factorsthat institutional investors encounter when participating in commercial real estate markets.This question seeks to identify systematic barriers including regulatory constraints, market inefficiencies, information asymmetries, liquidity limitations, and operational challenges. Furthermore, it examines specific risk categories such as political risk, economic volatility, currency fluctuations, legal uncertainties, and exit constraints. Understanding these challenges is critical for developing strategies to mitigate barriers and enhance the attractiveness of commercial real estate investment, particularly in emerging economies.

RQ4. How do regulatory frameworks influence institutionalinvestment in commercial real estate?
The fourth research question examines the relationship between regulatory environments and institutional investor participation in commercial real estate markets. This question explores how regulations governing property rights, foreign investment, taxation, disclosure requirements, and transaction processes affect institutional investment decisions and capital flows. It seeks to identify regulatory features that either facilitate or constrain institutional participation, drawing insights from comparative analyses across different regulatory jurisdictions. The findingswill inform recommendations for regulatory reformsthat can attract and retain institutional capital in commercial real estate sectors.

RQ5. What policy measures can be adopted to enhance institutional investor participation in commercial real estate funding?
The fifth research question focuses on evidence-based policy interventions that can optimize institutionalinvestor engagement in commercial real estate markets. This question synthesizes empirical findings and theoretical frameworks to identify effective policy measures across multiple dimensions including regulatory reform, market infrastructure development, transparency enhancement, incentive structures, and institutional capacity building. It examines successful policy interventions implemented in various markets and assesses their applicability to emerging market contexts. The insights generated will provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, industry stakeholders, and market regulators seeking to create enabling environments for institutional investment in commercial real estate.

3. **LOCATING RELEVANTSTUDIES**

The second step of the systematic literature review is concerned with locating journal articles relevant to the subject areas under investigation. The purpose of searching relevant studies is to create a comprehensive list of core contributions concerning the review questions (Chigbu et al., 2023). To ensure broad coverage and capture diverse perspectives on institutional investment in commercial real estate, this study utilized multiple online databases including Science Direct, Emerald, Taylor and Francis, Web of Science, Sage Publications, Springer, JSTOR, Wiley Online Library, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. These databases are widely recognized in academia and have been extensively employedin studies conducting systematic literature reviews (Chapman, 2021; Heck et al., 2024; Tinoca et al., 2022). The selection of these databases ensures access to high-quality, peer-reviewed journals across disciplines including real estate finance, economics, business management, urban development, and international investment.

Consistent with prior systematic reviews, this study employs defined keywords as search criteria in online databases. Keywords were derived through multiple sources: examination of seminal literature on institutional investment and real estate finance, review of recent publications in leading journals, and collaborative brainstorming sessions among researchers to identify and validate search terms for enhanced comprehensiveness and quality. To create a more focused and accurate literature review, selected keywords were refined and combined into search strings using Boolean logic operators. Primary search strings included: "institutional investors" AND "commercial real estate"; "investment funding" AND "real estate" AND "Nigeria"; "real estate finance" AND "emerging markets"; "pension funds" OR "insurance companies" AND "property investment"; "REITs" AND "investment performance"; and "regulatory frameworks" AND "real estate investment." Additional search strings incorporated terms such as "capital allocation," "market efficiency," "property development," and "Lagos" to capture studies with specific geographical or thematic relevance.

These search strings were systematically applied across all selected databases, with searches conducted in article titles, abstracts, and keywords fields. The search process was documented meticulously to ensure transparency and replicability, recording the number of results returned by each database for each search string combination, thereby establishing a comprehensive foundation for subsequent study selection and evaluation.

Study Selection and Evaluation

This systematic literature review focuses exclusively on published peer-reviewed journals, serving as a quality indicator of methodological rigor and conceptual accuracy (Newbert, 2007). The peer-review process ensures that included studies have undergone critical evaluation by independent experts, thereby enhancing the reliability and validity of findings synthesized in this review. The following stringent criteria were established for the inclusion and exclusion of articles:

- Articles publishedin peer-reviewed academicjournals in Englishlanguage
- Journals in the subject areasof Real EstateFinance, Economics, BusinessManagement, Urban Development, International Investment, and Property Studies
- Empirical research papers employing quantitative, qualitative, or mixed-methods approaches
- Papers published between 2020 and 2025. The year 2020 was selected as the starting point because it represents a period of significant transformation in real estate investment patterns globally, marked by technological advancement, regulatory reforms in emerging markets, and evolving institutional investor strategies. The endpoint of 2025 ensures inclusion of the most recent and contemporary research, capturing current trends and emerging issues in institutional real estate investment
- Articles containing at least one primary keyword in their title, abstract,or keyword list
- Studies focusing on institutional investors, commercial real estate,investment funding, or closely related topics
- Research with clearempirical findings, theoretical contributions, or policyimplications relevant to the research questions

To ensure a systematic and reliable analysis, this study followed a rigorous multi-stage article selection process. First, the selected online databases were comprehensively scanned using the defined keyword combinations and Boolean search strings as indicated in Figure 2. Articles identified were initially sorted by relevance based on database algorithms, with manual verification of relevance conducted subsequently. The preliminary search yielded 386 articles that appeared to fulfill the basic inclusion criteria. After removing duplicates across different databases and excluding non-peer-reviewed publications such as conference papers, working papers, book chapters, and editorial commentaries, 298 unique peer-reviewed journal articles remained for further evaluation.

In the second screening phase, two independent reviewers examined the abstracts and conclusions of each article to assess relevancy to the underlying research questions. This dual- review approach minimized selection bias and ensured consistency in application of inclusion criteria. Studies deemed non-relevant to the purpose of this systematic review were systematically eliminated. Reasons for exclusion at this stage included: focus on residential rather than commercial real estate, examination of individual rather than institutional investors, emphasis on markets substantially different from emerging economies, or lack of empirical findings. Through this rigorous screening process, 127 articles were identified as meeting the relevance criteria established for this study.

In the final selection phase, the full texts of these 127 articles were thoroughly read and critically evaluated. Articles demonstrating clear and substantial relevance to the research questions; specifically addressing institutional investor contributions, investment strategies, challenges, regulatory influences, or policy implications in commercial real estate contexts, were selected for final inclusion. This comprehensive evaluation resulted in 45 high-quality, peer-reviewed empirical studies forming the foundation of this systematic literature review.

Analysis of the temporal distribution of selected articles reveals that research examining institutional investment in commercial real estate has intensified significantly in recent years, with approximately 73% of selected studies (33 out of 45) published between 2022 and 2025. This accelerating scholarly interest reflects the growing importance of institutional capital in real estate markets globally, particularly in emerging economies where infrastructure development and urbanization create substantial investment opportunities. The concentration of recent publications also indicates evolving research focus toward contemporary challenges including regulatory frameworks, market transparency, sustainability considerations, and technology integration in real estate investment processes.

The 45 selected studies were published across 38 distinguished interdisciplinary journals, demonstrating the broad academic interest in institutional real estate investment. Leading contributors include Journal of Real Estate Finance and Economics, Real Estate Economics, Journal of Property Research, International Journal of Strategic Property Management, and Journal of Property Investment & Finance, collectively accounting for 28% of selected articles.

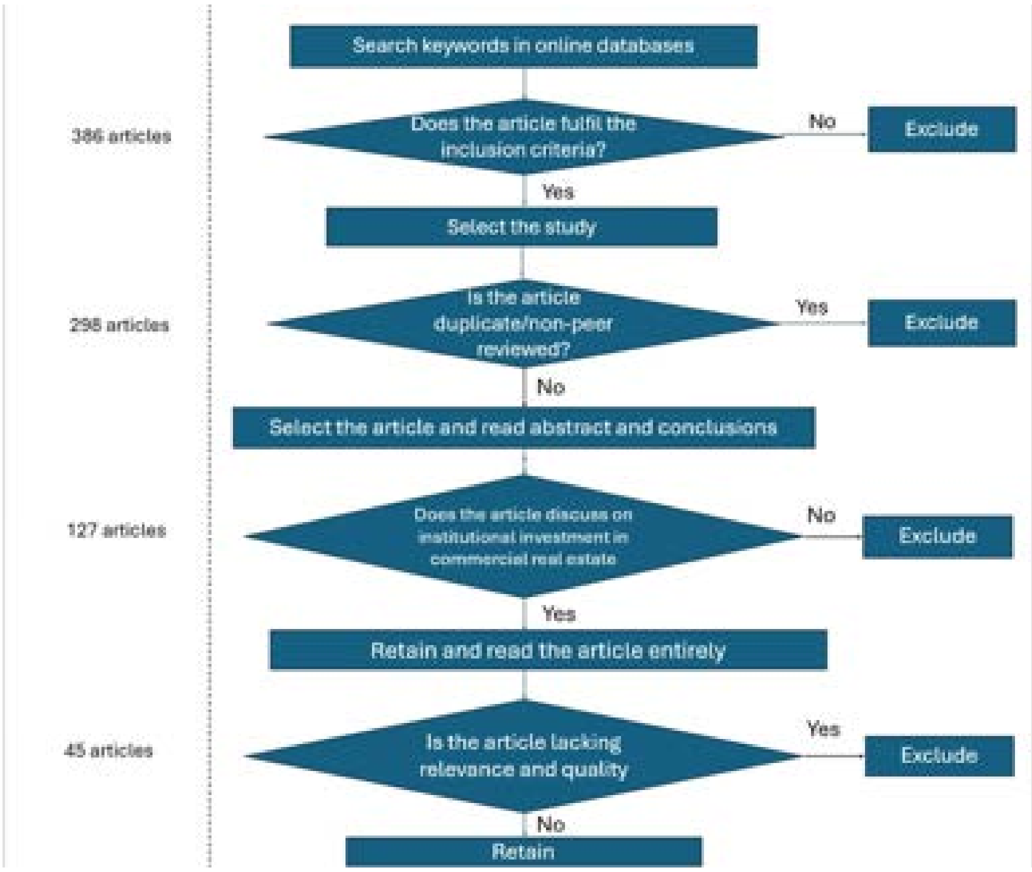

Figure 2: Inclusion and Exclusion of Studies

This diverse journal representation ensures comprehensive coverage of theoretical perspectives, methodological approaches, and empirical contexts relevant to understanding institutional investors' impact on commercial real estate funding.

4. ANALYSIS AND SYNTHESIS OF SELECTED STUDIES

This phase of the systematic review focuses on organising extracted information to addressthe research question. MicrosoftExcel was used to build a comprehensive data-capture system for all selected studies. Figure 3 showcases the publication years of each article and collates the number of articles analysed by the publication year.

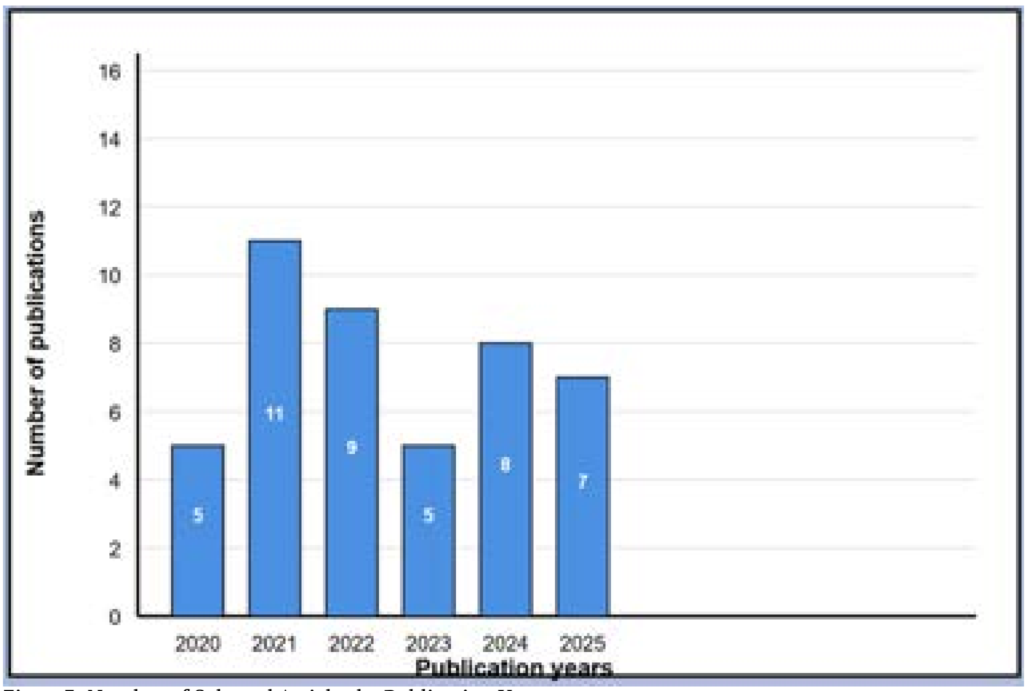

Figure3: Number of Selected Articles by Publication Year

Details such as authors, publication year, article title, purpose, theoretical framework, variables, research questions or hypotheses, methodology, key findings, recommendations, limitations, future research directions, and study locationwere systematically recorded. These data were structured in a Literature Review Survey Table to ensure clarity and comparability across the 45 articles reviewed.

Purpose	Study type	Theoretical Foundation	Concepts/ Dimension Construct Variables	Research Question/ Research Objectives/	Research Design	Key Findings	Research contribution/ Implication

5.STUDY FINDINGS

The empirical investigation of institutional investment in commercial real estate has gained substantial attention in recent years, particularly in emerging market contexts. Prior literature in this topic area has investigated the significance of potential determinants and impacts of institutional investors on real estate markets within different settings: individual country studies and comparative analyses across multiple markets. In the following sections, studies concerning institutional investment in commercial real estate will be reviewed based on key thematic areas: investment decision-making and strategies, market performance and determinants, challenges and barriers, and regulatory and market infrastructure considerations. The synthesis presented here draws from 45 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025, providing contemporary insights into institutional real estate investment dynamics.

Understanding how institutional investors approach real estate investment decisions represents a fundamental area of inquiry in contemporary research. Ekemode and Olaleye (2020) examined asset allocation decision-making practices of institutional real estate funds in Nigeria, revealing that institutional investors employ sophisticated analytical frameworks when determining portfolio composition. Their research demonstrated that institutional funds in developing economies face distinct challenges compared to their counterparts in developed markets, requiring adapted decision-making models that account for market-specific characteristics including liquidity constraints, information asymmetries, and regulatory uncertainties.

Aziz et al. (2024) provided a critical review of institutional real estate investment decision - making models, identifying significant gaps between theoretical frameworks developed in Western contexts and their applicability to emerging markets. Their systematic analysis revealed that conventional modelsoften fail to adequately capturethe complexity of investment decisions in markets characterized by high volatility, limited transparency, and evolving regulatory frameworks. The authors emphasized the need for context-specific decision-making frameworks that incorporate local market dynamics, institutional constraints, and risk factors unique to developing economies.

Ahiadu et al. (2024) explored key considerations of commercial property investors amid economic uncertainty, finding that institutional investors prioritize risk mitigation strategies and diversification approaches when confronting volatile market conditions. Their empirical investigation revealed that decision-making processes become increasingly conservative during periods of economic instability, with investors demanding higher risk premiums and focusing on core assets with established income streams. The study highlighted how macroeconomic uncertainty fundamentally reshapes investment criteria, time horizons, and portfolio allocation strategies among institutional participants.

The evolution of investment paradigms represents another critical dimension of institutional real estate investment. Ayodele et al. (2022) investigated investment perspectives in urban office space management, specifically examining coworking space investments in Nigeria. This research illustrated how institutional investors are adapting to changing workplace dynamics and emerging property use patterns, demonstrating flexibility in investment strategies to capture opportunities in evolving market segments. The findings suggested that institutional capital is increasingly flowing toward innovative property formats that align with contemporary business practices and demographic shifts.

Empirical evidence regarding real estate investment performance provides essential insights into the outcomes of institutional participation in property markets. Agava et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive reviewof studies on real estateinvestment performance in Nigeria, synthesizing evidence on returns,risk characteristics, and performance drivers across different property types and market conditions. Their systematic review revealed considerable variation in investment performance across property sectors, geographical locations, and time periods, emphasizing the importance of careful market selection and property type specialization for institutional investors.

Bello et al. (2021) analyzed investment property typology, examining relationships between Nigerian urban property returns and macroeconomic variables. Their empirical investigation demonstrated that institutional real estate investments exhibit distinct sensitivity patterns to macroeconomic factorsincluding inflation rates, GDP growth,interest rates, and exchange rate fluctuations. The research revealed that commercial properties demonstrate different risk- return profilescompared to residential investments, with implications for portfolio construction and risk management strategies employed by institutional investors.

Ojo et al. (2022) assessed the performance of commercial and residential real estate investments in the Ibadan property market, comparing investment outcomes across different asset classes. Their findings indicated that commercial properties generated superior risk- adjusted returns compared to residential investments during the study period, though commercial assets demonstrated higher volatility and liquidity constraints. This evidence suggests that institutional investors must carefully balance return objectives against liquidity requirements and risk tolerance when allocating capital across property sectors.

Udobi et al. (2023) examined the performance of commercial and residential property investments in Onitsha metropolis, Anambra State, providing additional evidence on regional market dynamics. Their analysis revealed significant variations in investment performance across different Nigerian cities, highlighting the importance of local market knowledge and geographical diversification in institutional real estate portfolios. The study emphasized that institutional investorscannot assume uniform market conditions across different urban centers within the same country.

The relationship between macroeconomic dynamics and real estate investment returns represents a critical consideration for institutional investors with long-term investment horizons. Gamu and Agava (2023) investigated macroeconomic dynamics and causal effects on residential real estate investment returns in Abuja and Lagos. Their econometric analysis identified specific macroeconomic variables that significantly influence property returns, providing empirical guidancefor institutional investorsseeking to incorporate macroeconomic forecasting into investment decision-making processes. The research demonstrated that institutional investors must maintain sophisticated understanding of macroeconomic relationships to effectively manage portfolio risk and optimize returns.

The availability and structure of financing mechanisms fundamentally shape institutional investment capacity and strategies in real estate markets. Alohan and Ogedengbe (2021) explored capital market options in financing real estate development in Nigeria, examining how institutional investors access and deploy capital through various market channels. Their research revealedsignificant underdevelopment in capital market infrastructure supporting real estate investment, creating barriers to efficient capital allocation and limiting institutional participation. The study identified specific reforms needed to enhance capital market functionality for real estate financing, including improved regulatory frameworks, enhanced transparency requirements, and development of specialized financing instruments.

Ibrahim et al. (2021) reviewed real estate finance sources and their effects on property development in Nigeria. Their comprehensive analysis documented the diverse financing channels available to real estate investors, ranging from traditional bank lending to emerging alternative financing mechanisms. The research highlighted how limited access to long-term, affordable financing constrains institutional investment activity and development capacity, particularly for large-scale commercial projects requiring substantial capital commitments. The authors emphasized that financial sector development represents a critical prerequisite for expanding institutional real estate investment.

Oguntuase and Windapo (2021) examined green bonds and green buildingsas new options for achieving sustainable development in Nigeria. Their research explored how innovative financing instruments can facilitate institutional investment in environmentally sustainable real estate projects. The study revealed growing institutional interest in sustainable property investments, driven by both risk management considerations and increasing recognition of environmental, social, and governance (ESG) factors in investment decision-making. However, the authors noted that limited market infrastructure and regulatory frameworks currently constrain the development of green financing mechanisms in Nigerian real estate markets.

Despite the potential benefits of institutional participation in real estate markets, numerous challenges and barriersconstrain investment activity,particularly in emergingmarket contexts. Nebolisa and Udobi (2024)and Makata and Udobi (2024)examined challenges of international investment in real property portfolios in developing economies, with specific focus on metropolitan cities in Nigeria. Their research identified multiple interconnected challenges including regulatory uncertainties, property rights ambiguities, limited market transparency, infrastructure deficiencies, and macroeconomic volatility. These systemic challenges elevate investment risks, increase transaction costs, and potentially deter institutional capital deployment despite attractive underlying market fundamentals.

Adeyemi (2024) investigated the impact of failed real estate developments on the property market in Lagos State. This research revealed how project failures and market disruptions create negative externalities affecting broader market confidence and institutional investment appetite. The study documented cascading effects of development failures on property valuations, investor sentiment, and market liquidity, emphasizing the importance of project execution capabilities and risk management practices. For institutional investors, failed developmentsrepresent both direct financial lossesand indirect impacts through deteriorating market conditions and reputational risks.

Ozigbo and Nnamani (2023) explored barriers to global trends in the real estate development industry with focus on Nigeria. Their investigation identified structural impediments preventing Nigerian real estate markets from fully integrating with global investment flows and adopting international best practices. Key barriers included inadequate professional capacity, limited technology adoption, weak regulatory enforcement, and insufficient market infrastructure. These findings suggested that addressing systemic barriers requires coordinated efforts across multiple stakeholders including government agencies, industry participants, and professional organizations.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced additional challenges and transformed risk perceptions in real estate markets. Oyedeji (2020) examined the impact of COVID-19 on real estate transactions in Lagos. The research documented immediate disruptions to market activity including transaction volume declines, valuation uncertainties, and changed investor preferences. For institutional investors, the pandemic highlighted vulnerabilities in commercial real estate assets dependent on physical occupancy, accelerating reassessment of portfolio compositions and risk exposures.

Nosiri (2024) investigated risk management in the post-COVID-19 economy, specifically examining investors' perceptions of Lagos State real estate sector. The findings revealed that institutional investors have recalibrated risk assessment frameworks and investment strategies in response to pandemic-related disruptions. Key themes includedincreased emphasis on asset quality, enhanced due diligence processes, preference for assets with flexible use characteristics, and heightened attention to tenantcreditworthiness. The researchdemonstrated that pandemic experiences fundamentally reshaped institutional investors' approach to real estate investment in emerging markets.

Understanding factors that influence property values represents essential knowledge for institutional investors seeking to optimize investment decisions and portfolio performance. Ibrahim et al. (2022) reviewed factors affecting residential property values in Nigerian cities. While focused on residential properties, their comprehensive analysis provided insights applicable to broader real estate investment contexts. The research identified location characteristics, infrastructure accessibility, security conditions, property attributes, and macroeconomic factors as key value determinants. For institutional investors, understanding these value drivers enables more effective property selection, risk assessment, and return forecasting.

Ighosewe et al. (2021) examined crude oil price dynamics and the Nigerian economy through a resource-dependence approach. Given Nigeria'sheavy reliance on oil revenues,their analysis

provided critical context for understanding macroeconomic volatility affecting real estate markets and institutional investment. The research demonstrated how oil price fluctuations transmit through the economy, influencing currency values, inflation rates, government spending capacity, and overall economic activity; all factors with direct implications for commercial real estate demand, property values, and investment returns.

Abdulkarim (2023) conducted a systematic review of investment indicators and economic growth in Nigeria. This comprehensive synthesis examined relationships between various investment metrics and economic performance, providing broader context for understanding real estate investment within national economic development patterns. The findings emphasized the interconnected nature of investment flows across sectors and the importance of macroeconomic stability for sustaining institutional investment inreal estate and other asset classes.

Technological innovation represents an increasingly important dimension of real estate markets, with implications for both operational efficiency and investment strategies. Adegoke et al. (2022) analyzed factors influencing virtual reality technology adoption by real estate firms in Lagosproperty market, examining both determinants of adoption decisions and criteria for measuring technology implementation success. While focused on technology adoption by real estate firms rather than institutional investors directly, their research illuminated how technological capabilities and innovation adoption influence market competitiveness and operational effectiveness. For institutional investors, technology adoption by property managers, brokers, and developers affects transaction efficiency, information quality, and ultimately investment performance.

The quality of human capital and professional expertise available in real estate markets significantly influences institutional investment effectiveness and market development. Multiple studies by Ayodele and colleagues examined various dimensions of real estate education, professional development, and human capital in Nigeria. These investigations revealed significant gaps between educational preparation and industry requirements, constraints on entrepreneurial activity in real estate sectors, and challenges in professional development pathways. While not directly focused on institutional investment, these studies provided important context regarding the professional infrastructure supporting real estate markets.

Ogunbiyi and Oladokun(2023) identified key performance indicators in real estateprofessional business in Lagos. Their research contributed to understanding how professional service quality affects market efficiency and investment outcomes. For institutional investors, the availability of competent professional services, including valuation, property management, legal services, and brokerage, represents a critical factor influencing market accessibility, transaction costs, and investment risks.

Corporate governance and regulatory frameworks significantly influence institutional investment in real estate markets, affecting both direct property investments and investments in real estate companies or funds. Kafidipe et al. (2021) examined corporate governance, risk management, and financial performance of listed deposit money banks in Nigeria. While focused on banking sector, their findings regarding governance quality and risk management practices providedrelevant insights for institutional investorsconsidering real estatefinancing partners or evaluating governance standards in real estate companies.

Tijjani and Peter (2020) investigated ownership structure and tax planning of listed firms in Nigeria. Their research illuminated how ownership configurations and tax considerations influence corporate behavior and financial outcomes. For institutional real estate investors, understanding tax implications, ownership structures, and regulatory compliance requirements represents essential knowledge for structuring investments efficiently and managingregulatory risks.

The comprehensive reviewof empirical literature reveals several overarching themes regarding institutional investment in commercial real estate within emerging market contexts, particularly Nigeria.

First, institutional investors face substantially different operating environments in emerging markets compared to developed economies, requiring adapted investment strategies, decision-making frameworks, and risk management approaches. Standard modelsdeveloped in Western contexts often prove inadequate without modification to accommodate local market characteristics.

Second, market infrastructure development such as capital market functionality, regulatory frameworks, professional service availability, and information systems, critically influences institutional investment capacity and effectiveness. Systemic improvements in these foundational elements represent prerequisites for expanding institutional participation.

Third, macroeconomic volatility, particularly related to commodity price fluctuations and currency instability, significantly affects real estate investment performance and risk profiles. Institutional investors must incorporate sophisticated macroeconomic analysis into investment processes and maintain appropriate risk mitigation strategies.

Fourth, information asymmetries, transparency limitations, and property rights uncertainties create elevated transaction costs and investment risks. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts across regulatory reform, professional capacity building, and technology adoption.

Fifth, the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reshaped risk perceptions and investment strategies, accelerating trendstoward quality focus,enhanced due diligence, and reassessment of property type exposures. Post-pandemic investment approaches reflect heightened risk awareness and changed preferences regarding asset characteristics.

These findings collectively emphasize that whileinstitutional investors can play transformative roles in commercial real estate market development, realizingthis potential requiresaddressing multiple interconnected challenges spanning regulatory, economic, professional, and infrastructural dimensions. The evidence suggests that sustainable expansion of institutional real estate investment in emerging markets depends not only on investor capabilities but fundamentally on broader market development and institutional strengthening.

1.EMPIRICAL STUDIES:CROSS-COUNTRY STUDY

While country-specific studiesprovide valuable insightsinto institutional investment dynamics within particular contexts, cross-country comparative analyses offer broader perspectives on factors influencing real estate investment across different markets and economic conditions. Cross-country studies enable identification of universal patterns while revealing context- specific variations in institutional investment determinants, strategies, and outcomes (Weber & Mayer, 2023). However,the contemporary literature on institutional real estate investment demonstrates a notable gap in cross-country comparative research, particularly focusing on emerging markets and developing economies. The limited cross-country empirical evidence available primarily concentrates on developed marketsor compares developedand developing economies, with relatively few studies examining institutional real estate investment patterns across multiple emerging markets.

The existing cross-country research on institutional investment in emerging market real estate remains sparse compared to the extensive literature on foreign direct investment determinants across countries. This gap represents a significant limitation in current knowledge, as cross-country analyses could illuminate whether institutional investment determinants identified in single-country studies represent universal factors or context-specific phenomena. Understanding these patterns holds particular importance for international institutional investors seeking to allocate capital across multiple emerging markets and for policymakers attempting to enhance their countries' competitiveness in attracting institutional real estate investment.

Despite limited direct cross-country studies on institutional real estate investment, several researchers have examined related phenomena that provide relevant insights. Nebolisa and Udobi (2024) investigated challenges of international investment in real property portfolios within developing economies, focusing on metropolitan cities in Nigeria. While primarily addressing Nigerian contexts, their analytical framework incorporated comparative perspectives by examining how international investors evaluate investment opportunities across different developing economy contexts. Their research identified common challenges facing international institutional investors in emerging markets including regulatory uncertainties, property rights ambiguities, infrastructure deficiencies,and market transparency limitations. These findings suggested that institutional investors confront similar fundamental challenges across developing economies, though specific manifestations vary based on local conditions.

Makata and Udobi (2024) extended this analysis through examination of international investment challenges using Nigerian experience as a case study within broader developing economy contexts. Their research employed comparative analytical frameworks to position Nigerian real estate investment challenges within the spectrum of issues confronting institutional investors across emerging markets. The study revealed that while certain challenges demonstrate universal characteristics across developing economies, such as regulatory complexity and information asymmetries; the severity and specific forms of these challenges vary substantially across different markets. This variation emphasizes the importance of context-specific analysis even while recognizing common patterns.

The methodological challenges inherent in cross-country institutional real estate investment research partially explain the limited empirical literature in this area. Researchers must address data availability constraints, measurement standardization issues, and analytical complexities arising from institutional, regulatory, and market structure differences across countries. These methodological challenges prove particularly acute when examining emerging markets where data quality, availability, and comparability often present significant obstacles.

Ahiadu et al. (2024) addressed some of these methodological considerations through their investigation of decision-making amid economic uncertainty among commercial property investors. While their primaryfocus centered on Australian markets,their analytical framework incorporated comparative dimensions by examining how economic uncertainty influences investor behavioracross different market contexts. The research methodology employed could serve as a template for future cross-country studies examining institutional investor responses to various marketconditions and risk factors. Theirfindings revealed that economic uncertainty fundamentally reshapes investment criteria and decision-making processes, with institutional investors demonstrating similar behavioral responses across different market environments, though with context-specific variations in magnitude and timing.

Cross-country comparative analysis of real estate investment performance remains underdeveloped in contemporary literature, representing a significant research gap. Existing single-country performance studies, such as those by Ojo et al. (2022) examining Ibadan property market performance and Udobi et al. (2023) analyzing Onitsha metropolis investments, provide valuable insights within their specific contexts but lack comparative frameworks that would enable assessment of relative performance across different markets. Such comparative performance analysis would prove particularly valuable for institutional investors making asset allocation decisions across multiple emerging markets.

The absence of standardized performance measurement frameworks and benchmarks across emerging market real estate sectors constrains development of robust cross-country performance comparisons. Agava et al. (2021) highlighted this challenge in their comprehensive review of real estate investment performance studies in Nigeria, noting significant variations in methodologies, time periods, and performance metrics employed across different research studies. These inconsistencies complicate efforts to synthesize findings and develop generalizable conclusions about institutional real estate investment performance in emerging markets.

Comparative analysis of regulatory and institutional frameworks represents another underdeveloped area in cross-country institutional real estate investment research. While numerous studies examine regulatory environments within specific countries, systematic comparative analyses that would enable assessment of relative regulatory effectiveness and identification of best practices remain limited. Aziz et al. (2024) provided critical review of institutional real estate investment decision-making models, incorporating comparative perspectives by examining how different regulatory and institutional contexts shape investment decision frameworks. Their analysis suggested that regulatory quality, consistency, and enforcement significantly influence institutional investor participation, though the specific regulatory features most critical to investment decisions may vary across different market contexts.

The research by Ozigbo and Nnamani (2023) exploring barriers to global trends in real estate development in Nigeria incorporated implicit comparative dimensions by examining gaps between Nigerian practices and international standards. Their findings highlighted how regulatory fragmentation, inconsistent enforcement, and limited alignment with international best practices create barriers to institutional investment. These observations suggested that regulatory convergence toward internationally recognized standards could facilitate greater institutional investor participation, though successful implementation requires adaptation to local conditions rather than simple transplantation of foreign regulatory models.

Comparative analysis of market infrastructure development across emerging markets could provide valuable insights for understanding institutional investment patterns and informing development strategies. Ibrahim et al. (2021) examined real estate finance sources and their effects on property development in Nigeria, identifying significant infrastructure gaps in financing mechanisms, capital markets, and supporting institutions. While their analysis focused on Nigeria, the conceptual framework employed could support comparative research examining how variations in financial market development across countries influence institutional real estate investment capacity and activity levels.

Alohan and Ogedengbe (2021) explored capital market options in financing real estate development, examining how capital market infrastructure influences investment capacity. Their analysis, while Nigeria-specific, raised questions amenableto cross-country comparative investigation: How do variations in capital market development, regulatory frameworks, and institutional capacity across emerging markets influence institutional real estate investment patterns? Which specificcapital market featuresprove most criticalfor facilitating institutional investment? How do successful emerging markets overcome infrastructure constraints to attract institutional capital?

Cross-country comparative research on technology adoption and innovation in real estate markets remains notablyabsent from contemporary literature. Adegoke et al. (2022)examined virtual reality technology adoption by Lagos real estate firms, providing insights into technology diffusion patternswithin a specificmarket context. However,comparative research examining technology adoption patterns across different emerging markets could illuminate how technological capabilities and innovation influenceinstitutional investor participation and market development. Such research could address questions regarding whether technology adoption follows similar patterns across emerging markets or demonstrates context-specific characteristics based on infrastructure availability, regulatory frameworks, and market maturity.

Comparative analysis of human capitaldevelopment and professional capacity across emerging real estate markets represents another research gap with significant implications for institutional investment. The multiple studies by Ayodele and colleagues exami ning various dimensions of real estate education, professional development, and human capital in Nigeria provided valuable insights within that specific context. However, comparative research examining how professional capacity varies across emerging markets and influences institutional investment patterns would enhance understanding of this critical factor. Such research couldinform strategies for professional development and capacity buildingthat would enhance markets' competitiveness in attracting institutional investment.

While several studies examined macroeconomic factors influencing real estate investment within specific countries, comprehensive cross-country comparative analyses of macroeconomic relationships remain limited. Gamu and Agava (2023) investigated macroeconomic dynamics and effects on residential real estate investment returns in Abuja and Lagos, providing intra-country comparative insights. However, cross-country research examining how macroeconomic relationships vary across different emerging markets could provide valuable insights for institutional investors managing multi-country portfolios. Such research could address questions regarding whether macroeconomic sensitivities demonstrate universal patterns across emerging markets or vary based on economic structures, policy frameworks, and development levels.

Ighosewe et al. (2021) examinedcrude oil pricedynamics and Nigerianeconomic performance, illustrating how commodity dependence influences macroeconomic stability and, by extension, real estate investment conditions. Comparative research examining how resource dependence patterns vary acrossemerging markets and influence real estate investment attractiveness could provide valuable insights for institutional investors and policymakers. Understanding these relationships would enable more effective risk assessment and portfolio diversification strategies for institutional investors operating across multiple commodity-dependent economies.

The systematic review reveals significant gaps in cross-country comparative research on institutional real estate investment in emerging markets. While extensive literature examines investment patterns, determinants, and outcomes within specific countries, limited research adopts comparative frameworks that would enable identification of universal patterns versus context-specific phenomena. This gap constrains development of generalizable knowledge about institutional real estate investment in emerging markets and limits capacity to develop evidence-based policy recommendations applicable across different contexts.

Future cross-country research should prioritize several key areas. First, comparative studies examining institutional investment determinants across multiple emerging markets would enable assessment of which factors demonstrate universal importance versus context-specific significance. Second, comparative performance analysis employing standardized methodologies and metrics would provide valuable insights for institutional investors making asset allocation decisions across markets. Third, systematic comparison of regulatory frameworks, market infrastructure, and institutional capacity across emerging markets would identify best practices and inform development strategies. Fourth, comparative research on technology adoption, professional capacity, and innovation patterns would illuminate how these factors influence institutional investment across different contexts.

The limited cross-country comparative research identified in this systematic review represents both a significant knowledge gap and an opportunity for future scholarly contribution. Addressing this gap through rigorous comparative empirical research would substantially enhance understanding of institutional real estate investment dynamics in emerging markets, providing valuable insights for investors, policymakers, and researchers seeking to optimize institutional participation in commercial real estate development.

1.CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A growing body of literature addresses institutional investment in commercial real estate, particularly in emerging market contexts. However, existing research has lacked systematic application of rigorous SLR methodologies to synthesize empirical evidence comprehensively. This systematic review addresses this methodological gap by employing structured protocols to evaluate 45 peer-reviewed empirical studies published between 2020 and 2025, providing enhanced understanding of institutional investor impacts, determinants, and challenges in commercial real estate sectors. The systematic review reveals several critical findings. First, institutional investors significantly influence market development through capital provision, introduction of professional standards, and enhancement of market efficiency (Ekemode & Olaleye, 2020; Aziz et al., 2024). Second, investment decision-making processes in emerging markets require adapted frameworks that account for context-specific characteristics including regulatory uncertainties, information asymmetries, and macroeconomic volatility (Ahiadu et al., 2024; Nebolisa & Udobi, 2024).Third, market infrastructure quality encompassing capital market functionality, regulatory frameworks, professional capacity, and information systems represents a fundamental determinant of institutional investment capacity (Alohan & Ogedengbe, 2021; Ibrahim et al., 2021).

However, consensus regarding specific determinants and optimal strategies remains elusive across empirical studies. This variability reflects differences in methodological approaches, analytical frameworks, time periods examined, and contextual factors across markets. The heterogeneity of findings aligns with observations that institutional investment patterns demonstrate both universal characteristics and context-specific variations requiring localized analysis.

This systematic review acknowledges several limitations. The SLR methodology employed relied on specific online databases using predefined search strings within a defined temporal scope (2020-2025), potentially constraining breadth of coverage. Geographic focus predominantly centered on Nigerian contexts, limiting generalizability to other emerging markets. Additionally, the relative scarcity of cross-country comparative studies constrained capacity to identify universal patterns versus context-specific phenomena.

Future research should prioritize several directions such as cross-country comparative studies examining institutional investment determinants across multiple emerging markets,

longitudinal research tracking institutional investment evolution and impacts over extended time periods, sectoral analyses examining variations across commercial property types, investigation of technology impacts on institutional real estate investment, and assessment of sustainability considerations and ESG factors in institutional decision-making (Oguntuase & Windapo, 2021). These research directions would substantially enhance understanding of institutional real estate investment dynamics in emerging markets.

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FROM HUMAN MENTORS TO ALGORITHMIC ADVISORS: THE ROLE OF GENERATIVE AI IN REPOSITIONING NIGERIAN ENTREPRENEURS GLOBALLY

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Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI) technologies are rapidly evolving and changing the global entrepreneurial landscape, particularly how entrepreneurs access opportunities, operateand scale their businesses. Entrepreneurial mentoring can enhance knowledgetransfer and learning on both the contentand process of entrepreneurship and provide emotionalsupport which helps tointegrate novice entrepreneurs into the entrepreneurial ecosystem. The incorporation of AI- driven tools and platformsin mentoring practicespresents an innovative dynamism that offers both prospects and challenges for entrepreneurs. However,an understanding of how AI-driven mentoring particularly the use of Generative AI (GAI) strengthens the capabilities of Nigerian entrepreneurs and enhancestheir competitive advantageglobally is still limited. Drawingfrom social cognitive theory and Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2), and adopting a qualitative research method, this study investigates the role of algorithmic advisors in repositioning Nigerianentrepreneurs globally. Theoretically, this study will contribute to extending knowledge on AI adoption in entrepreneurial mentoring particularly in the context of a developing county. Furthermore, we anticipate that results from the study will provide context specific practical recommendations to Nigerian entrepreneurs on how AI-mentoring can help them compete internationally.

Key Words: *Human Mentors, Algorithmic Advisors, Nigerian Entrepreneurs, AI-mentoring, Generative AI (GAI)*
Track: Entrepreneurship

Introduction

Mentoring involves a developmental relationship between an experienced individual referred to as a mentor and a less experienced person called a mentee, traditionally characterized by face-to-face interactions (Bagai and Mane, 2023; Choudhary et al., 2025). While mentorship has gained attention as a crucial part of the entrepreneurial ecosystem, focus has been on traditional face-to-face models characterised by geographical accessto entrepreneurial support and resources (Lall et al., 2022). However, technological advancement has brought about a rapid change to how people interact in many domains, including mentoring (Mullen and Klimaitis, 2019). Consequently, mentoring practices are increasingly being integrated with technology leading to new approaches such as virtual mentoring, e-mentoring and AI-driven mentoring for facilitating mentoring relationships (Choudhary et al., 2025).

Within these technologically integrated approaches, computer-mediated tools become the primary channels of communication betweenthe mentors and their mentees(Haran and Jeyaraj, 2019; Andersen and Thomas,2023). Furthermore, psychological, geographical, and logistical barriers, and biases that come with traditional mentoring approaches are potentially removed while mentor accessibility increases particularly for those who previously might have been disenfranchised by spatial and temporal divides as well as marginalised populations (Sanyal and Rigby, 2016; Lindsay et al., 2018; Mullen and Klimaitis, 2019; Andersen and Thomas, 2023). The increased adoption of AI in mentoring practices presents both benefits and challenges. According to Choudhary et al. (2025), AI-mediated mentoring is highly beneficial as it allows for flexibility, opportunity to personalise learning experiences, scalability, easy tracking of mentee progress, effective mentor-mentee matching, and equitable access to mentoring. However, it can also result in algorithmic bias, data privacy, security, and ethics issues, limited ability to support mentees emotionally, and transparency and explainability of AI-driven recommendations (Bagai and Mane, 2023).

Previous studies have found that AI-driven mentoring led to improved ability to generate new ideas, offer personalised guidance, encouraged independent research, supported development of career plans, increased engagement and motivation among students and graduates (Gonzalez-Rico and Lluch, 2024;Guilbault et al., 2025; Kellam,2025). However, most of these studies have been carriedout among, students,graduates, and within higher education settings. Furthermore, limited studies have explored the use of GAI in entrepreneurial mentoring particularly in developing countries and those that have focused on the influence of Chatbots on entrepreneurial intention development (Mwaanga et al., 2026). Consequently, this study addresses this gap by investigating the influence AI-driven mentoring within the context of Nigerian entrepreneurial landscape specifically in relation to how AI- driven mentoring can enable the repositioning Nigerian entrepreneurs in the global landscape.

Research Aim Objectives & Questions Aim

To investigate the influence of adoption of generative AI (GAI) in entrepreneurial mentoring on the transformational repositioning of Nigerian entrepreneurs globally.

Objectives

1. To explore the perception of Nigerian entrepreneurs on generative AI as a mentoring resource for entrepreneurial learning.
2. To examine the conditions that determine the adoption of generative AI by Nigerian entrepreneurs as a mentoring resource to enhance their ability to compete globally.

Research Questions

1. How do Nigerianentrepreneurs perceive generative AI as a mentoring resourcefor supporting their entrepreneurial learning?
2. What factors shape the adoption of generative AI by Nigerianentrepreneurs as a mentoring resource to enhance their ability to compete globally?

Literature Review

AI Adoptionin Entrepreneurship

Artificial Intelligence (AI) is the applied competence of non-human technologies capable of interacting, solving problems, carrying out multiple tasks in a logical manner which is often faster than human intelligence (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2023). AI tools are now widely used in business to help with increased productivity, marketing, automation, customer relations, analytics and to stay relevant in a competitive marketplace (Dvouletý et al., 2025). Evidence shows that some of the AI tools commonly used among entrepreneurs are Zendesk AI, ChatGPT,Salesforce Einsten, GoogleGemini, Zapier, Microsoft Copilot amongst a wide range of options (Alnofeli et al., 2025). AI promotes business scalability and gives a competitive edge to entrepreneurs through access to information and increased capacity building (Ganuthula, 2025).

Studies have described the benefits of artificial intelligence ranging from supporting sustainable business goalsto improving societalinclusion especially amongentrepreneurs from ethnic minority (Gupta et al., 2023; Scillitoe et al., 2025). Ghonisyah and Asyiah (2025) and Altinay et al., (2026) established that AI helps to promote equality which dismantles some levels of barriersconfronting entrepreneurs. In contrast to the great benefits of AI in business, it poses some challenges such as ethical concerns that requires certain measures are kept in place to ensureAI is used responsibly (Gupta et al., 2023). Similarly, previous studies have shown that businesses especially those from the minority group who are not technologically savy may struggleto adopt AI (Etemad, 2024). Cultural perception and cost of investment may influence limits to how AI is being used and this can have an impact on business performance (Alateeg and Al-Ayed, 2024).

AI Adoption in Entrepreneurial Mentoring

Entrepreneurial mentoring is particularly helpful for transfer of knowledge, development of competence, increased businessperformance, and providing practical solutions relevantto both individual and social needs particularly for novice entrepreneurs who otherwise have difficulties in obtaining proper training due to lack of resources (Hamburg, 2020; Clayton, 2024; Hennig et al., 2024; Shukla and Dangi, 2025). Additionally, previous studies have established that entrepreneurial mentoring increased entrepreneurial intentions, aided entrepreneurial learning, reduced fear of failure, increased self-efficacy, self-confidence, opportunity recognition, and facilitated the integration of entrepreneurs into the broader entrepreneurial community (Nabi et al., 2019; Baluku et al., 2020; Lall et al., 2022; Clayton, 2024). Over the last few years, there has been shifts towards the role of digitalization in entrepreneurial processes including in how business owners' access and utilise support (Bhavsar and Sangle, 2023). There is increasingly more reliance on AI for real-time decision making and entrepreneurial learning which has shifted the way entrepreneurs engage human networks and computational tools in overcoming growth challenges in their businesses (Aburai, 2026).

With the advancement of AI and machine learningthe possibilities withinmentoring practices have been further elevated as these systems can analyze data, track mentee needs, effectively match mentors with mentees, and provide actionable insights to both parties (Choudhary et al., 2025). Previousstudies have exploredAI adoption in mentoring and have come up with various findings. For instance, it has been found that AI can support the delivery of personalised learning experiences by functioning as a tool for transforming learning and critical reasoning which is vital for problem solving among entrepreneurs (Chen 2022; Wu, 2024). It has also been found that AI adoption in mentoring frees up time and provides flexibility for entrepreneurs who need tailored support to achieve their business goals (Bhandare; 2024). While severalstudies have pointedto the benefits of integrating AI in mentoring, other studies have found concerns around ethical bias and limited psychosocial support which is a key mentoring function (Alavi et al., 2024). There have also been concerns about confidentiality with a call to ensure AI tools adopted are screened and regulated (Bhandare; 2024). Other studies have calledfor a balance of humanand AI collaboration in mentoringpractices (Jarrahi et al., 2023). Overall, there is evidence indicating the potential that AI-driven mentoring has for improving entrepreneurial mentoring.

Theoretical Framework

This research is underpinned by the Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) proposed by Albert Bandura (1977). According to Bandura, SCT involves as a triadic reciprocity which is an interplay between personal factors, behaviours, and the environment. SCT is appropriate for this study as it has been previously used to study mentoring relationships within many contexts including entrepreneurship (Lall et al., 2022; Akah et al., 2025).Central to SCT is self-efficacy which is the belief in one's ability or capacity to execute a behaviour successfully. Moreover, it emphasises the role of cognitive components in learning which can be applied to both human and technology mediated mentoring relationships. Although SCT propounds that individuals learn both behaviours and cognitive strategies which drive personal change and development by observing the behaviours of others (Balukuet al., 2020;Lall et al., 2022), this study's focus on exploring how this occurs AI-driven learning environment.

In addition, this study is also grounded in the Unified Theory of Acceptance and Use of Technology 2 (UTAUT2) propounded by Venkatesh et al. (2012). UTUAT 2 is an extended model of UTAUT with more constructs outperforming earlier theories like Technology Acceptance Model (Kulak et al., 2019; Tamilmani et al., 2021). The theory helps us to explain how technology is adoptedand used, evaluating its performance expectancy, effort expectancy, social influence, Price, hedonic motivation, habits and facilitating conditions. Together, these theories allow for understanding of the perception Nigerian entrepreneurs in adopting generativeAI as a mentoring resourceto aid entrepreneurial learning and enhance their global competitiveness.

Research Methodology

Ontologically, this study identifies that realities are subjective and socially constructed. The methodology is rooted in the interpretivist paradigm, and a qualitative research design will be adopted. This aligns with the research objectives which explores the lived experiences of Nigerian entrepreneurs and provide empirical evidence that can create a contextually relevant and solution driven result (Einfeld and Sullivan, 2025). In this case, how AI-Mentoring influences the capabilities and competitiveness, and repositioning of Nigerian entrepreneurs in the global market space. A purposive non-probability sampling technique will be adopted because it enables the researchers to select participants from whom in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study can be obtained(Saunders et al., 2019). We aim to conduct semi- structured interviews with 15 - 25 Nigerian entrepreneurs who engage in informal mentoring using GAI such as ChatGPT, Claude, Co-Pilot and Gemini in making business decisions and supporting their entrepreneurial learning and have used it consistently for at leastone year. To address the research aim, and answer the researchquestions, data obtainedwill be thematically analysed via NVivo to identify, organise, and offer insights into emerging patterns from the study.

Contribution to Knowledge and Future Direction

The integration of AI in mentoring, and its transformational potential for Nigeriaentrepreneurs remains under explored highlighting a need for a context specific study because entrepreneurship is a major driver of a nations' economy particularly developing nations like Nigeria through job creation, poverty alleviation, and inclusive growth. Consequently, this study will answer two questions: How Nigerian entrepreneurs perceive generative AI as a mentoring resource to support their entrepreneurial learningand factors that shape the adoption of generative AI by Nigerian entrepreneurs as a mentoring resource to enhance their ability to compete globally? This study advances the discourse on AI adoption in entrepreneurship with a focus on entrepreneurial mentoring framed around SCT and UTUAT2.Secondly, the findings from this study will contribute to practice by providing Nigerianentrepreneurs evidence-based recommendations on how to enhance their global competitiveness with their counterparts across the world particularly in relation to understanding global trends, identifying export opportunities, and adapting their products and services for different countries.

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TRUST AS REPUTATION WORK: HOW SMES MANAGE SOCIAL EVALUATION ACROSS INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS

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Introduction

This development paper examines trust and distrust as social evaluation processes within small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). The paper pays particular attention to how reputational mechanisms operate across divergent institutional contexts. Within this study, we have chosen to consider treating trust as a dynamic lubricant that shapes relationships (Mollering, 2006; Li, 2021; Amoako, 2018), rather than a static interpersonal or organisational concept (see Omeihe, 2019). As a result, the study approaches and examines aspects of how reputational structures through which SME exchange is governed. The tritest question here is, what is trust? As a construct, trust is a social lubricant that glues the relationship together (Lewis and Weigert, 2005). And without trust itself, society itself disintegrates (Simmels, 2006). It is that shared expectation that people have within a relationship (Zucker, 1986). Within this framing, trust is treated as a relational process embedded in reputational circuits rather than as a discrete psychological state (Khodyakov, 2007; Moellering, 2006; Bachman and Inkpen, 2019). It is worth mentioning that SME owners and managers do not simply decide whether to trust a particular partner. In fact, they have been found to engage in continual evaluation of reputations, interpret signals of reliability or opportunism, and position themselves within social evaluation systems that condition access, legitimacy, and survival (Amoako, 2018; Falehin et al., 2024; Okpanum and Omeihe, 2026). Within this context, trust becomes visible as 'reputation work.' This implies that active construction leverages evaluations of judgments through social actors. This resonates with Moellering's (2006) point of trust being that leap of faith, where the trustee suspends all assumptions of hope of a favourable outcome.

In building on the above, we note that research on trust has been shaped by three interconnected streams. First is the aspect of vulnerability, which has been espoused by scholars such as Mayer et al. (1995) and Rousseau et al. (1998), reinforced by the notion of the trustee being vulnerable to malfeasance. The second stream of trust research underscores the linkage to institutional trust theory (Zucker, 1986; North, 1990). And how trust matters for institutions and how this shapes entrepreneurial activity. The last stream focused on trust antecedents of ability, benevolence, and integrity (also known as the ABI model-see Mayer et al., 1995) and how this informs the trustor's evaluation of the trustee's reputation, legitimacy, and status (Washington and Zajac, 2005; Bitektine and Haack, 2015).

While the three streams identified above provide a robust foundation, they remain largely embedded within Western institutional assumptions. A more complete account of trust in the contexts under study requires engagement with indigenous African trust architectures, which operate through distinct mechanisms that formal institutional theory tends to render invisible. In many sub-Saharan African commercial environments, trust is not primarily anchored in contractual enforcement or bureaucratic reliability but in kinship proximity, ethnic affiliation, and the reputational authority of community intermediaries (Fafchamps, 2000; Lyon, 2000; Amoako and Lyon, 2014). Fafchamps (2000) demonstrated empirically that ethnicity functions as a screening and signalling mechanism in African manufacturing networks, not through prejudice but through the informational economies of shared social membership, where in-group reputation travels faster and carries greater accountability weight than any formal credential. This particularised trust, grounded in relational proximity rather than institutional verification, constitutes the primary governance logic for a significant proportion of SME exchange in contexts such as Lagos and Abuja (Fafchamps, 2004; Omeihe et al., 2021).

Equally important is the role of informal dispute resolution as a trust-sustaining institution. Where formal courts are perceived as costly, slow, or subject to corruption, entrepreneurs do not simply abandon governance; they route it through trade associations, community elders, rotating savings and credit associations such as esusu and ajo, and sector-based intermediaries whose reputational authority derives from sustained network embeddedness rather than legal mandate (Amoako and Lyon, 2014; Omeihe et al., 2021; Lyon, 2000). These mechanisms are not residual or primitive alternatives to formal enforcement. They are functional institutions in North's (1990) sense, comprising rules, norms, and enforcement procedures that structure behaviour and carry genuine sanctioning power within their domains. Failing to theorise them as such risks reproducing the institutional hierarchy the paper explicitly seeks to avoid.

At a deeper philosophical level, the relational ontology embedded in Ubuntu thought offers a conceptual resource for understanding why African entrepreneurs construct trust as an inherently communal rather than dyadic process. The Ubuntu principle, broadly rendered as "I am because we are," positions the individual as constituted through relationship rather than before it (Mangaliso, 2001). Within this logic, reputation is not an attribute of a self-contained actor, but a relational judgment continuously produced and maintained through communal interaction. This resonates directly with the concept of reputation work advanced in this paper and suggests that what Western trust scholarship frames as a social process is, within many African contexts, an ontological given. Bringing Ubuntu into the analytical frame does not require abandoning existing theoretical scaffolding; it deepens it by grounding reputation work in a non-Western account of why relational evaluation is constitutive rather than merely instrumental.

Taken together, these Afrocentric perspectives strengthen the emic dimension of the framework and equip the comparative analysis to engage with trust mechanisms that differ not only in institutional strength but in kind.

Within this paper, the point we want to put forward is that what counts as ‘trust’ in practice is inseparable from how reputations are constructed, maintained, and circulated within specific institutional environments. Again, this underscores the etic and emic debates of trust, which argues that while trust is the same across contexts, trust on its own is also context specific (Zaheer and Zaheer, 2006; Omeihe, 2019). It is therefore a moot point to note that in contexts where institutional reliability is weak and dysfunctional, reputational evaluation often becomes a primary governance mechanism that fills the gap left by weak or unpredictable formal enforcement (Fafchamps, 2004; Amoako and Lyon, 2014; Welter and Smallbone, 2015). On the other hand, where institutions are stronger, reputational dynamics do not disappear; instead, they interact with formal contracting and legal protections in more layered ways (Dyer and Chu, 2003; Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006). Based on the foregoing, the is organised around two sub-interrelated research questions that foreground reputation and social evaluation dynamics. **RQ1: How are reputations evaluated as a basis for trust and RQ2: How do distrust and negative reputation dynamics shape organisational practices within SMEs?** These assumptions around this line of questioning focus on the context and processes of reputational evaluation. In doing so, we ask what criteria SME owners use to assess the trustworthiness of stakeholders. And how those criteria vary between environments where formal enforcement is perceived as reliable. Especially where it is experienced as inconsistent or costly. This may provide useful insight into how reputational judgements are formed, transmitted, and revised over time. Recent developments on trust research centers on positive reputations, yet negative evaluations are equally constitutive of social order (see Falehin et al, 2025). This has led some to reflect how SME owners respond when they anticipate opportunism, unreliability, or institutional failure (North, 1990, Welter, 2015; Welter and Smallbone, 2016). Equally, there appears to be a dearth of studies that have considered which governance practices become more salient under conditions of distrust. Taking a big picture approach, the potential framework for this paper adopts a comparative analysis of how UK-registered Nigerian-founded SMEs and their counterpart in based in Nigeria to identify the commonalities and differences in their perception of trust, reputation, and institutions. While this is still a development paper, we believe that this study offers several potential contributions. First, it connects entrepreneurship research on trust and contextualisation (Welter, 2011, 2012); while the discourse would proceed to explicate organisational scholarship on social evaluations such as reputation, status, legitimacy, and stigma (Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Rindova et al., 2005). Second, the paper will shed light on how social evaluation dynamics of entrepreneurs operate across institutional boundaries.

Methodology

The study adopts a comparative qualitative design that combines in-depth semi structured interviews with critical incident techniques (Jenssen and Kristiansen, 2004; Omeihe et al., 2020). The sampling logic aims to capture patterned variation across business characteristics and social locations that are likely to shape reputation dynamics. Nigerian field sites. Lagos is treated as a commercial center characterised by dense market interaction and sectoral clustering, whereas Abuja is approached as a political and administrative center with greater everyday contact with state institutions. Within these sites, sampling will include both service-based and product-based SMEs, male and female owner-managers, variation in owner and firm age, and representation across four commercially salient ethnic groups (Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, plus one additional group, depending on local patterns). The UK component focuses on UK-registered Nigerian-founded and/or Nigerian owned SMEs across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. The sampling frame mirrors the Nigerian structure by incorporating variation in business type, gender, and age of both firms and owner-managers. The emphasis is on firms where Nigerian identity is substantively tied to ownership and strategic control, rather than on Nigeria-registered firms that merely trade into the UK. Primary participants will be SME owners and senior managers, as they are centrally involved in relational governance and institutional evaluation. Where appropriate, interviews will also be conducted with boundary actors such as trade association leaders, accountants, and sector intermediaries who influence reputational information flows and informal dispute resolution.

The total sample will comprise approximately 30 to 40 interviews distributed across both field contexts. Within Nigeria, between 12 and 16 interviews will be conducted, with broadly equal distribution across Lagos and Abuja to maintain comparative depth within the Nigerian context. Within the UK, between 12 and 16 interviews will be conducted with SME owners and managers of Nigerian-founded enterprises across the four nations. An additional six to eight interviews will be conducted with boundary actors across both contexts, including trade association representatives, accountants, and sector intermediaries whose positional knowledge of reputational information flows adds analytical value beyond the primary participant group. These figures represent working targets rather than fixed quotas; sampling will proceed iteratively until theoretical saturation is achieved.

Theoretical saturation will serve as the primary stopping rule for data collection. Following Strauss and Corbin (1998), saturation will be assessed at the level of categories rather than themes, specifically when additional interviews cease to generate new conceptual properties or dimensional variation in the constructs under investigation, including reputational evaluation criteria, trust formation processes, and institutional judgements. Saturation will be assessed independently for each national context before cross-case comparison proceeds, ensuring that the comparative logic is not compromised by uneven depth across sites.

Access to participants in Nigeria will be facilitated through established relationships with trade associations in Lagos and Abuja, building on prior fieldwork networks developed through the supervisory team. In the UK, access will be negotiated through diaspora business networks, sector intermediaries, and community organisations with ties to Nigerian entrepreneurial communities. Snowball sampling will supplement purposive recruitment where initial access proves constrained, particularly for harder-to-reach boundary actors. Ethical approval will be obtained through the University of the West of Scotland's institutional ethics procedure prior to any fieldwork commencing.

All interviews in the UK and with English-speaking participants in Nigeria will be conducted in English. Where participants prefer to conduct interviews in Yoruba, Hausa, or Igbo, a professionally qualified interpreter will be engaged. Interview transcripts produced in languages other than English will undergo a two-stage translation and back-translation procedure to ensure conceptual equivalence rather than merely linguistic accuracy (Brislin, 1970). Member checking will be employed selectively, inviting participants to review summaries of their accounts to verify interpretive accuracy and reduce the risk of researcher-imposed meaning.

Semi-structured interviews will investigate how reputations are formed and evaluated in business relationships, how trust and distrust are narrated and enacted, how institutional actors are judged, and how relationships are governed when reputational signals are mixed or negative (Crotty, 1998; Colman and Rouzies, 2019; Hack-Polay et al., 2020; Moellering, 2006). The critical incident technique will anchor discussion in specific episodes of trust formation, breakdown, and repair, encouraging participants to reconstruct concrete sequences of events rather than offering abstract opinion (Chell, 2004; Omeihe and Harrison, 2024). Where ethically appropriate, organisational documents will be used as prompts to support recall and deepen reflection. Analysis will combine thematic and process-oriented approaches. First-order coding will remain close to participants' language to identify how trust, reputation, reliability, risk, and institutional judgements are articulated (Braun and Clarke, 2008; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Saunders et al., 2019). Second-order coding will then assemble these into broader categories linked to social evaluation theory and institutional perspectives on trust. Process analysis will trace temporal sequences around reputation construction, trust formation, distrust management, and attempts at repair. Cross-case comparison will ask how similar relational problems are managed across different institutional contexts, business types, genders, ethnic positions, and UK nations.

Developmental Plans

Three conceptual and methodological challenges require further development. The first concerns the conceptual boundaries between trust and reputation. Trust is typically understood as a willingness to accept vulnerability based on positive expectations of another party's behaviour (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998; Lewicki and Bunker, 1995), whereas reputation is a socially constructed evaluation that circulates beyond any single dyadic relationship and is collectively produced through ongoing social interaction (Rindova et al., 2005; Washington and Zajac, 2005; Bitektine and Haack, 2015). In lived practice, however, these processes are deeply entangled: reputational signals inform trust decisions, and trust experiences continuously revise reputational judgements (Khodyakov, 2007; Moellering, 2006; Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006). Whether the analysis should foreground reputation as the central mechanism through which trust operates in practice or treat trust and reputation as distinct yet interacting processes that require separate analytical treatment, remains an open and productive question for the framework to resolve empirically.

The second challenge concerns the structural logic of the dual-context comparative design. Including UK-registered Nigerian-founded SMEs as a distinct analytical category creates rich comparative possibilities, but it also raises questions about how to organise the analysis across three rather than two positions (Drori et al., 2009; Welter, 2011; Vershinina and Rodgers, 2020). There is a productive tension between foregrounding within-context variation, such as the differences in reputational governance across Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba commercial networks within Nigeria, and cross-context contrasts in institutional reliability and formal enforcement capacity (Fafchamps, 2000; Omeihe et al., 2021). These levels of variation are analytically significant in different ways, and the study must identify patterned institutional effects without essentialising 'Nigerian' or 'UK' trust logics as internally homogeneous (Zaheer and Zaheer, 2006; Welter and Smallbone, 2015; Omeihe, 2019).

The third challenge relates to distrust and negative reputation dynamics. The social evaluation literature is considerably more developed on positive reputation formation than on distrust, stigma, and the circulation of negative evaluations (Rindova et al., 2005; Bitektine and Haack, 2015; Falehin et al., 2025). Empirically, asking entrepreneurs to discuss opportunism, relational failure, or institutional distrust may generate cautious, partial, or strategically managed accounts (Gillham, 2005), which is why the critical incident technique and member checking are built into the analytical design as mitigating procedures. Theoretically, whether distrust should be conceptualised as low or absent trust, as a distinct orientation that can coexist with trust across different relational domains, or as a qualitatively different kind of reputation work with its own logic and consequences, remains unresolved in the literature (Lewicki and Bunker, 1995; Moellering, 2006; Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006). Building a framework that takes distrust seriously as a generative analytical category, rather than treating it as the residual category left behind when trust fails, is a central developmental task for the next stage of this work.

Conclusion

This paper has advanced a conceptual argument with direct implications for how trust scholarship engages with SME governance across divergent institutional contexts. Rather than treating trust as a discrete psychological state or fixed relational property, the analysis repositions it as reputation work: an active and ongoing process through which social actors construct, circulate, and revise evaluative judgements about the trustworthiness of potential and existing partners. This reframing shifts the analytical focus from what trust is to what trust does, opening productive inquiry into the mechanisms through which reputational governance operates where formal institutional reliability cannot be assumed.

The dominant tradition in trust research has prioritised positive trust formation, modelling it as a rational or affective calculation between actors operating within broadly functional institutional environments (Mayer et al., 1995; Rousseau et al., 1998; Lewicki and Bunker, 1995). This paper has argued that such framing is insufficient for contexts where institutions are seen as unreliable, costly, or structurally exclusionary. In those environments, reputational evaluation is not a supplement to formal governance but its primary substitute, carrying sanctioning authority and structuring access in ways formal mechanisms cannot (Zucker, 1986; Fafchamps, 2004; Amoako and Lyon, 2014).

The comparative design, spanning Nigeria and the UK and incorporating UK-registered Nigerian-founded SMEs as a distinct analytical category, creates conditions to observe how the same relational problems are solved through different governance logics, and how entrepreneurs operating across both contexts develop hybrid repertoires not fully determined by either (Welter, 2011; Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006; Drori et al., 2009). The integration of Afrocentric trust architectures, theorising kinship networks and informal dispute resolution as functional institutions and grounding reputation work in Ubuntu philosophy, equips the framework to engage with trust mechanisms that differ not only in institutional strength but in kind (Fafchamps, 2000; Lyon, 2000; Mangaliso, 2001; Omeihe et al., 2021).

The three propositions advanced here offer a structured entry point for the empirical inquiry, held as theoretically grounded claims consistent with the interpretivist epistemology and social constructivist ontology informing the broader research design. The fieldwork will interrogate, refine, and where necessary revise these propositions through engagement with SME owners, senior managers, and boundary actors across Lagos, Abuja, and the UK. The goal is to allow conceptual precision to emerge through dialogue between theory and the lived experience of entrepreneurs navigating institutional uncertainty. That dialogue, and the analytical framework it produces, constitutes the substantive contribution this study aims to make.

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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS: DUAL EMBEDDEDNESS, KINSHIP TRUST, AND NIGERIAN DIASPORA ENTREPRENEURS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Management discipline: Entrepreneurship and Small Business Management
Keywords: Dual embeddedness; diaspora entrepreneurship; institutional context; kinship trust; governance
Research methodology: Comparative qualitative case study
Area where input is valued: (c) Methodology

Abstract

This study examines how Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom manage trust and distrust across conditions of dual institutional embeddedness, and how kinship-based trust norms carried from the country of origin interact with the formal institutional expectations of the host country in shaping everyday business relationships. Drawing on embeddedness theory and institutional logics, the study argues that Nigerian entrepreneurs in the UK are not simply UK businesses with Nigerian owners; they are social actors simultaneously situated within two contrasting institutional environments, each carrying its own rules, norms and expectations about how business relationships are formed, governed and sustained. Using a comparative qualitative design, the study investigates how this dual embeddedness produces tensions, complementarities, and novel hybrid governance arrangements in key SME relationships that have not yet received focused empirical attention.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

Key insights into the structure of African entrepreneurship consistently point to the significance of informal network relationships as the primary mechanisms through which entrepreneurs navigate environments characterised by weak or deficient state-backed institutional frameworks. Within this body of knowledge, existing research has established that Nigerian and African diaspora entrepreneurs in the UK draw on trusted family, kinship and community ties from home to develop enterprises, while simultaneously building the resilience required to withstand both the limitations of informal institutions in their countries of origin and the discriminatory obstacles encountered in the host country. What remains underdeveloped, however, is a focused account of how trust and distrust operate as the primary governance mechanisms through which this dual embeddedness is actively managed in the everyday relational practice of SME owners.

This study branches directly from larger doctoral research examining how trust and distrust are understood, experienced and managed by SME owners in Nigeria and the United Kingdom, and how these processes are shaped by institutional context. Where the main thesis positions Nigeria and the UK as two separate but comparable institutional environments, this study asks what happens in the space between them. Nigerian-owned SMEs in the UK occupy that space. They are not simply UK businesses with Nigerian owners; they are enterprises simultaneously embedded in two institutional realities, each carrying its own logic about how business relationships are formed, governed, and trusted. Examining this dual embeddedness is therefore not a detour from the main thesis but an intrinsic deepening of it, one that responds to calls for greater theoretical attention to the situated, context-specific dimensions of trust in migrant entrepreneurship research.

The aim of this study is to examine how Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurs in the United Kingdom manage trust and distrust across dual institutional embeddedness, and how kinship-based trust norms from the country of origin interact with the formal institutional expectations of the UK in shaping everyday business relationships.

KEY CONCEPTS FROM THE LITERATURE

Economic action is not reducible to rational calculations. It is shaped by the concrete personal relations and social structures within which actors are situated, a position that has long anchored the sociology of economic life. For Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurs, however, this embeddedness is not singular but dual: it operates across two simultaneously active institutional environments, each imposing its own structural demands. Recent work on transnational migrant entrepreneurs in the UK has shown that embeddedness is a dynamic, interactive process involving structural, institutional and cognitive dimensions in both home and host countries at once, and that successful integration into the host country context is directly shaped by network forces operating in the country of origin. In the Nigerian context specifically, the informal network logics and kinship-based trust norms carried from home are particularly pronounced, historically well-documented, and deeply consequential for how business relationships are formed and maintained (Bagwell, 2018; Tawiah and Amoako, 2020; Amoako and Lyon, 2014; Omeihe et al., 2021a; Granovetter, 1985, 1992).

African diaspora entrepreneurs in the UK occupy a paradoxical institutional position. The informal institutions that constrain foreign investors in Nigeria can become assets for diaspora entrepreneurs, enabling them to establish enterprises and exploit market opportunities precisely because they understand and can navigate those informal arrangements. At the same time, these entrepreneurs face formal institutional expectations in the UK, where regulatory compliance, professional norms and contract law govern the dominant logic of business relationships. The formal and informal institutional gaps between these two environments are not simply contextual background; they are the active conditions within which decisions about trust; partnership and governance are made. When these logics collide, the consequences for how entrepreneurs embed, whom they trust and how they manage distrust are direct and consequential (Tawiah and Amoako, 2020; Bagwell, 2018; Thornton et al., 2012; Omeihe et al., 2021a).

In settings where formal institutions are weak or unreliable, trust does not function simply as an interpersonal virtue; it functions as an institutional substitute. Personal trust relationships become the primary instrument through which entrepreneurs address the limitations of deficient state-backed mechanisms, and concrete personal relations such as family ties, religion and trade associations serve as enforcement safeguards in the absence of reliable formal alternatives. What is particularly significant for this study is the proposition that Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurs in the UK do not abandon these trust arrangements when they move into a more formalised institutional environment. Rather, they carry them, adapt them, and negotiate between them and UK formal expectations in ways that produce novel hybrid governance arrangements. These arrangements represent an underexplored but theoretically significant dimension of diaspora entrepreneurship that existing research has not yet adequately described or explained (Amoako and Lyon, 2014; Omeihe et al., 2020; Omeihe et al., 2021a; Omeihe et al., 2021b; Lewicki et al., 1998).

Based on these concepts, and on the proposition that the intersection of two institutional logics creates governance challenges that are distinct from those faced by entrepreneurs embedded in a single institutional environment, this study is guided by two central questions.
First, how do Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurs in the UK draw on norms and informal network logics from Nigeria in managing their business relationships, and how do they respond to trust breakdowns that originate from the collision of these two institutional logics?
Second, in what ways does dual embeddedness produce tensions, contradictions, or complementarities in how trust and distrust are enacted in key business relationships?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

At the centre of this study is the recognition that capturing dual embeddedness and trust through a quantitative approach would be inadequate for the purposes of this inquiry. Where quantitative methods are poorly suited to capturing the social processes and lived meanings that constitute social reality, qualitative methods are particularly valuable when the focus is on complex social phenomena where context and subjective meaning are crucial. Consistent with this position, and with the interpretivist tradition within which this study is located, the study adopts a qualitative approach that attends to the situated, context-specific dimensions of trust as it is enacted by diaspora entrepreneurs navigating two institutional worlds simultaneously (Bryman, 1984, 2016; Chell, 2000; Omeihe et al., 2021a).
Following Yin (2014), the study adopts a multiple case study design across two groups: Nigerian diaspora SME owner-managers in the UK and SME owner-managers operating in Nigeria. This comparative design allows direct examination of how embeddedness and trust operate within a single institutional environment versus two simultaneously active ones. Semi-structured interviews will serve as the primary instrument of data collection, enabling the researcher to access the lived experience of dual embeddedness and its consequences for trust and distrust in everyday business relationships (Omeihe et al., 2020). A purposive sample of twelve to fifteen respondents per group is proposed, with diversity sought across sector, firm age, and gender, in line with the guidance of Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) on data saturation.

A critical incident technique will be applied throughout, asking participants to recount specific episodes in which trust norms carried from Nigeria collided with, or complemented, the formal institutional expectations of the UK business environment (Omeihe et al., 2020). This approach is particularly well suited to surfacing the lived experience of institutional collision, the moments at which the limits of each institutional logic become visible and consequential. Data will be analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006), drawing on the within-case and cross-case techniques outlined by Yin (2014) to enable defensible comparative inference across the two groups.

THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The study extends the embeddedness perspective by applying it to the specific condition of dual institutional embeddedness, the simultaneous situatedness of Nigerian diaspora entrepreneurs within two contrasting institutional environments. In doing so, it responds to calls within the migrant entrepreneurship literature for greater theoretical engagement with the ways in which embeddedness operates across contexts rather than within them. The study also contributes to the emerging literature on trust and distrust in SMEs by demonstrating that trust is not merely a relational variable but an institutionally situated governance mechanism that takes different forms depending on which institutional logic is dominant at any given moment in the entrepreneur's relational environment (Bagwell, 2018; Vershinina and Rodgers, 2019; Omeihe et al., 2020; Thornton et al., 2012).

For policymakers and business support practitioners in the UK, the study offers evidence-based insights suggesting that existing frameworks may not be effective for diaspora entrepreneurs whose governance logics do not map neatly onto formal institutional expectations. For Nigerian policymakers, the study draws attention to how the dual embeddedness of diaspora entrepreneurs represents a structural asset, one constituted by working knowledge of both institutional environments, that remains underutilised in current policy frameworks.

AREA WHERE INPUT IS VALUED

(c) Methodology

Specific feedback is sought on the following questions:

How to design a comparative case study that adequately captures dual embeddedness across two contrasting but interconnected institutional environments, particularly where the boundary between them is not spatial but relational and situational.

How to sample Nigerian diaspora SME owners in the UK alongside SME owners operating in Nigeria in ways that allow for defensible cross-group comparison, given the inherent asymmetry in institutional context across the two groups.

Whether a critical incident technique is the most appropriate instrument for surfacing the lived experience of institutional collision in trust relationships, or whether alternative methods would better capture the cumulative, everyday nature of that experience.

How to structure thematic analysis in ways that distinguish meaningfully between embeddedness in the home institutional environment, the host institutional environment, and the hybrid relational space between them.

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SEAM-WORKERS: ENTREPRENEURSHIP AS GEOPOLITICAL ARBITRAGE IN A MULTIPOLAR ORDER
A Developmental Conference Paper

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Abstract

The dominant institutional voids framing casts African entrepreneurs as gap-fillers compensating for deficient environments. This paper introduces an original construct the seam-worker denoting the entrepreneur who creates and captures value precisely from the friction, overlap, and incompatibility between competing global regimes. As the liberal international order fragments into a multipolar configuration, structural divergences in monetary systems, technology stacks, regulatory architectures, and payment rails generate differential value that entrepreneurially organised actors can intermediate. Drawing on literatures on institutional voids, bricolage, opportunity recognition, and international business arbitrage, this paper develops a typology of four seam-working strategies and presents two illustrative mini-cases. The seam-worker construct repositions the African entrepreneur from victim of a deficient context to an agent who actively monetises multipolarity.

Keywords: *seam-worker, geopolitical arbitrage, multipolarity, institutional voids, African entrepreneurship, geoeconomic fragmentation*

Introduction and the Puzzle

The canonical framework for understanding African entrepreneurship pivots on absence. Entrepreneurial activity is explained by what is missing: courts that enforce contracts, capital markets that allocate risk, regulatory systems that stabilise property rights (Khanna and Palepu, 1997; Mair and Marti, 2009). Within the institutional voids paradigm, the entrepreneur is cast as a compensatory agent, a local workaround in environments too thin or too predatory to support formal enterprise. The explanatory elegance of this perspective is considerable; its analytical reach, however, has arrived at a structural limit.

The puzzle this paper addresses is empirical before it is theoretical. Some of the most commercially productive entrepreneurial ventures on the African continent operate not despite geopolitical complexity but through it. A fintech venture routing trade payments around dollar scarcity by deploying dollar-pegged stablecoins on public blockchain rails; a consumer hardware startup toggling between Shenzhen manufacturing ecosystems and European Union safety certification regimes depending on the destination market; a logistics operator exploiting regulatory asymmetries between African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) member states to build a regional distribution network with cost structures unavailable to either purely local or purely global incumbents. None of these is best explained as a response to institutional absence. All three are responses to geopolitical friction.

This paper introduces a new analytical construct: the seam-worker. A seam-worker is an entrepreneur who identifies and exploits productive friction at the interface of competing global regimes regulatory, monetary, technological, or logistical rather than filling voids within a single deficient system. Seam-working is distinct from opportunism, rent-seeking, or regulatory evasion. It is a structured cognitive and strategic orientation toward multipolarity as an asset. The companion concept geopolitical arbitrage denotes the extraction of differential value arising from the deliberate non-convergence of competing world-order architectures.

The timing of this argument is not arbitrary. The post-1990 liberal international order, characterised by deepening economic integration, convergence toward a single regulatory grammar, and dollar-clearing hegemony, is fragmenting under documented pressures of great-power competition, sanctions proliferation, and technology decoupling (Aiyar et al., 2023; Farrell and Newman, 2019; Mearsheimer, 2019). In its place, a multipolar order is consolidating in which the United States, China, and the European Union each advance distinct technology stacks, payment architectures, and standards regimes. For entrepreneurs at the geographic and institutional periphery including much of sub-Saharan Africa this fragmentation does not uniformly worsen conditions. For a strategically positioned subset, it creates structural opportunity of a qualitatively new kind.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 critically reviews literatures on institutional voids, entrepreneurial opportunity recognition, bricolage, and international business arbitrage, locating the gap this paper fills. Section 3 develops the seam-worker framework and a typology of seam-working strategies. Section 4 presents two illustrative mini-cases. Section 5 discusses theoretical contributions, boundary conditions, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review: Critical Positioning

2.1 The Institutional Voids Paradigm and Its Discontents

The institutional voids framework is the most influential conceptual apparatus for analysing entrepreneurship in emerging and frontier markets. Originating in strategy scholarship on diversified business groups in India (Khanna and Palepu, 1997), it was operationalised for entrepreneurship research by Mair and Marti (2009), who identified the creation of new organisational forms as a response to the absence or dysfunction of formal institutions. The construct generated substantial empirical research, particularly in African contexts, where property rights fragility, credit market shallowness, and regulatory unpredictability are well documented (Zoogah, Peng and Woldu, 2015; Peng, 2003).

The framework's core analytical move treating institutional deficiency as both constraint and opportunity was genuinely productive. It introduced agency into what had previously been a predominantly structural account of African business performance. Webb et al. (2009) extended the logic persuasively, demonstrating that formal and informal legitimacy co-exist in complex configurations, so that what appears illegitimate from one institutional standpoint may be entirely rational and commercially productive from another.

Yet the framework harbours a structural assumption that has become analytically constraining: the institutional environment is evaluated relative to an implicit convergence benchmark, typically the OECD regulatory archetype. The implied teleology is one of institutional catch-up, and entrepreneurship is understood as provisional filling gaps until formal institutions mature. Naudé (2011) challenged the empirical foundations of this view, demonstrating that entrepreneurship in the poorest countries does not operate primarily as an institutional compensator and that standard proxies for institutional quality poorly predict entrepreneurial outcomes. More fundamentally, the institutional voids perspective carries no analytical vocabulary for entrepreneurs who benefit from the coexistence of multiple institutional regimes rather than the absence of any single one. When two regimes overlap, conflict, and produce productive friction, the voids metaphor actively misleads.

2.2 Opportunity Recognition and Its Geopolitical Blind Spot

Mainstream entrepreneurship theory locates value creation in either the recognition of exogenous opportunities or the active construction of new ones (Shane and Venkataraman, 2000; Alvarez and Barney, 2007). The discovery perspective treats opportunities as objective features of the economic landscape awaiting alert entrepreneurs; the creation perspective treats them as enacted through entrepreneurial action. Neither adequately accounts for opportunities whose primary source is geopolitical rather than economic. When the United States restricts Huawei equipment from its supply chains, a differential emerges in hardware procurement costs between Shenzhen-origin and US-allied ecosystems. This differential is not a market imperfection awaiting arbitrage in the conventional economic sense; it is an artefact of deliberate state-level contestation. Capturing value from this differential requires a theory of opportunity that is politically situated, not merely market-situated a gap neither the discovery nor creation tradition fills.

2.3 Bricolage: Resourceful but Apolitical

Entrepreneurial bricolage defined as ‘making do by applying combinations of the resources at hand to new problems and opportunities’ (Baker and Nelson, 2005, p. 333) has proven highly productive for analysing resource-constrained innovation in African and other developing contexts (Senyard et al., 2014). The bricoleur recombines available inputs in improvised configurations to create value under scarcity. Bricolage captures one dimension of the seam-worker's behaviour but misses its defining feature. The bricoleur responds to scarcity within a system; the seam-worker identifies structural divergence between systems as the primary raw material. Bricolage is a theory of making do; seam-working is a theory of making use of specifically, making use of geopolitical friction as a generative input. This distinction is not merely semantic: it implies different strategic orientations, different capability requirements, and different boundary conditions for entrepreneurial success.

2.4 International Business Arbitrage and the CAGE Framework

Ghemawat's (2001, 2003) CAGE framework Cultural, Administrative, Geographic, Economic distance provides the most developed account in international business of how asymmetries between national environments generate cross-border value. Arbitrage in the CAGE sense exploits differences in factor costs, regulatory burdens, or consumer preferences across locations to generate returns unavailable within a single national market. The seam-worker construct builds on but departs from CAGE in two important respects.

First, CAGE arbitrage typically assumes stable, exogenously given distance configurations. The seam-worker construct introduces the analytical possibility that entrepreneurs actively position themselves at newly forming seams; such as is created by geopolitical rupture rather than latent geographic or cultural distance. These seams are dynamic, contested, and often deliberately engineered by state actors. Second, CAGE analyses are predominantly conducted from the perspective of established multinational corporations optimising cross-border configurations. The seam-worker is typically a lean, fast-moving venture whose primary competitive asset is locational ambiguity and institutional bilingualism the capacity to operate credibly under multiple, potentially conflicting, institutional logics. This capability is not captured in standard CAGE distance metrics.

2.5 Multipolarity, Geoeconomic Fragmentation, and African Positioning

The geopolitical context generating seam-working opportunities is well evidenced in recent scholarship. Farrell and Newman (2019) theorise ‘weaponized interdependence’ the exploitation of network asymmetries by powerful states to coerce smaller actors as a defining feature of the current international order. Aiyar et al. (2023) model the economic costs of geoeconomic fragmentation, estimating long-run GDP losses of two to twelve per cent in scenarios of partial and full economic bloc formation. Mearsheimer (2019) argues that the liberal international order is structurally self-undermining, predicting sustained great-power competition as the organising logic of twenty-first century international relations. Blackwill and Harris (2016) articulate geoeconomics the use of economic instruments to advance geopolitical objectives as the dominant mode of contemporary statecraft, a framing that illuminates the monetisation logic embedded in competing technology standards, payment rails, and sanctions architectures.

Africa's position within this constellation is more agentive than conventional periphery accounts acknowledge. Carmody (2016) documents the continent as an active pivot space in US-China competition, with digital infrastructure, critical minerals, and payment ecosystems as primary sites of contestation. Leke, Chironga and Desvaux (2018) identify the continent's heterogeneous, informally integrated markets as a source of competitive advantage rather than institutional deficit. The mobile-enabled payment transformation documented by Suri (2017) is proceeding precisely at the moment that global payment fragmentation creates differential value for alternative clearing mechanisms. This structural confluence is the empirical condition of possibility for the seam-worker.

3. The Seam-Worker Framework

3.1 Core Construct

A *seam*, in geopolitical usage, denotes the zone of interface between incompatible but coexisting regimes: where the dollar-clearing system meets mobile money and stablecoin rails; where EU product certification meets Shenzhen manufacturing standards; where US export controls cast a shadow over Chinese Belt and Road procurement networks; where AfCFTA integration coexists with national capital controls and divergent treatment of cross-border financial flows. Seams are not voids. They are structurally dense, informationally complex, and permanently contested. Value accrues at seams because friction between regimes creates spreads in cost, time, legitimacy, or market access that entrepreneurially organised entities can intermediate.

The *seam-worker* is defined in this paper as an entrepreneur who:

(i) perceives geopolitical divergence as a primary source of differential value rather than as contextual noise or external constraint;

(ii) builds organisational capabilities oriented toward regime-straddling rather than regime compliance; and

(iii) deploys positioning ambiguity the capacity to operate plausibly under multiple, potentially conflicting, institutional logics as a deliberate competitive asset.

This three-part definition distinguishes the seam-worker from the passive regulatory arbitrageur (who exploits differences without structural intent), the informal sector operator (who circumvents rather than straddles regimes), and the multinational corporation (whose regime navigation is primarily compliance-driven rather than arbitrage-oriented).

3.2 A Typology of Seam-Working Strategies

Four ideal types constitute the seam-worker typology. These are not mutually exclusive; real ventures frequently combine elements of multiple types, and the typology is designed to be generative rather than exhaustive.

Type I: Monetary Seam-Working. Dollar scarcity the structural shortage of USD liquidity in African FX markets is paradoxically a product of dollar hegemony and its enforcement architecture. Where correspondent banking relationships have contracted through de-risking responses to US sanctions and anti-money-laundering compliance pressure, transaction costs for cross-border payments escalate sharply and access to dollar settlement becomes structurally rationed rather than price-rationed (IMF, 2022). Entrepreneurs occupying this seam deploy alternative clearing mechanisms stablecoin rails, mobile money corridors, bilateral FX platforms that route around the dollar chokepoint. Chainalysis (2023) documents that sub-Saharan Africa leads globally in stablecoin adoption as a share of on-chain transaction value, driven primarily by FX hedging and cross-border payment needs rather than speculative demand. World Bank (2022) Global Findex data confirm that mobile-enabled payment penetration in the region has outpaced formal banking inclusion, creating an infrastructure layer on which monetary seam-working is commercially feasible at scale. Evidence on the strategic intentionality of these actors as distinct from transactional adoption remains thin and warrants systematic primary research.

Type II: Technology Stack Seam-Working. The US-China technology decoupling creates a bifurcating global hardware and software ecosystem (Farrell and Newman, 2019; Doshi, 2021). For manufacturing and digital ventures operating in, or commercially connected to, Africa, this bifurcation generates a structural arbitrage opportunity: the capacity to toggle procurement, certification, and platform allegiance between ecosystems depending on the destination market and the current geopolitical configuration. A hardware startup sourcing components from Shenzhen benefiting from the cost advantages and ecosystem density documented by Breznitz and Murphree (2011) and Lindtner (2020) while simultaneously certifying products to EU or UK standards for export to European markets is performing a Type II strategy. The value premium derives precisely from the unwillingness or structural incapacity of incumbents fully entrenched in either bloc to operate efficiently in the other's procurement grammar.

Type III: Regulatory and Standards Seam-Working. Divergent regulatory regimes in fintech, data governance, and artificial intelligence create compliance asymmetries across jurisdictions. Bradford (2020) documents the Brussels Effect the tendency for EU regulatory standards to propagate globally through market power but notes that this propagation is selective and uneven, generating persistent regulatory differentials in under-governed spaces. Entrepreneurs who structure operations to capture the legitimacy premium of EU-aligned compliance while operating in markets where an alternative regulatory grammar is locally preferred — including markets where the Chinese digital governance model has been adopted through bilateral technology agreements are arbitraging regulatory spread in a form not captured by existing CAGE or institutional voids frameworks. The strategic asset here is not compliance per se but the option value of moving between compliance regimes as geopolitical temperatures shift.

Type IV: Sanctions and Parallel Corridor Seam-Working. The proliferation of unilateral and multilateral sanctions regimes has created a class of economies and commercial counterparties that are excluded from dollar-clearing and SWIFT-based correspondent banking but remain commercially active through bilateral, barter, or crypto-mediated channels (Drezner, 2015; Farrell and Newman, 2019). Entrepreneurs who operate commercial infrastructure connecting sanctioned and unsanctioned economic zones occupy an extreme form of the seam-worker position. This paper treats Type IV analytically: the construct does not endorse sanctions evasion, illicit finance, or related activities. Normative boundary conditions are addressed in Section 5.

4. Two Illustrative Mini-Cases

4.1 Case A: Cross-Border Fintech Routing Around Dollar Scarcity

Consider a West African payments venture operating in an environment where commercial bank USD liquidity is structurally constrained by central bank FX rationing. Dollar scarcity in Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya has been documented as a structural constraint on cross-border trade finance, arising from the combination of current account imbalances, reduced correspondent banking access, and the asymmetric burden-sharing imposed by the dollar's reserve-currency architecture (IMF, 2022). The conventional institutional voids framing treats this as a gap: a missing FX market of adequate depth. The seam-worker framing identifies a spread between the constrained official FX rate and the parallel rate; and between SWIFT-cleared payments (costly, slow, increasingly inaccessible to smaller African financial institutions) and stablecoin-settled payments (low-cost, near-instant, accessible to any internet-connected device).

This composite venture constructed from documented patterns in Chainalysis (2023) and the mobile money literature (Suri, 2017) routes B2B trade payments between West African importers and Chinese exporters using a dollar-pegged stablecoin settled on a public blockchain. Value is captured on both sides of the seam: from the African side, access to dollar-equivalent settlement without navigating central bank rationing; from the Chinese side, a payment rail that bypasses SWIFT compliance overhead entirely. This is not bricolage the entrepreneur is not improvising from available materials under scarcity. It is not an institutional void fill no missing institution is being substituted. It is geopolitical arbitrage in the precise sense advanced here: the venture's revenue model is indexed directly to the persistent non-convergence of the dollar-clearing system and its emerging alternatives. As Farrell and Newman (2019) note, structural dependence of global transactions on dollar-clearing nodes is itself a geopolitical instrument; the seam-worker treats this instrument as navigable terrain rather than a natural fact.

4.2 Case B: Hardware Startup Toggling Between Shenzhen and Western Supply Chains

The second case draws on documented patterns of African hardware ventures in the IoT and consumer electronics space. Shenzhen's manufacturing ecosystem characterized by radical supply-chain density, rapid prototyping infrastructure, and competitive component pricing (Breznitz and Murphree, 2011; Lindtner, 2020) is the natural gravitational centre for early-stage hardware ventures globally. However, US and EU export control regimes, component origin requirements under recent US semiconductor legislation, and EU product safety directives create a certification barrier for Shenzhen-sourced hardware entering Western-aligned markets.

A startup based in Rwanda or Kenya commercially connected to both ecosystems and without the structural commitments of an established industrial player to either can exploit this seam by maintaining dual procurement configurations: Shenzhen-optimised for products destined for intra-African continental markets (where US CHIPS Act provisions and CE marking are not mandatory conditions of market entry) and Western-supply-chain-compliant configurations for products exported to EU or US institutional purchasers. The competitive advantage is not embedded in the product but in the ability to navigate between two supply-chain grammars with greater agility than either a purely Chinese-ecosystem or a purely Western-ecosystem incumbent. World Bank (2022) data confirming growth of intra-African trade under the AfCFTA framework provides the demand-side context validating why a Shenzhen-cost-base with intra-African destination constitutes a commercially independent revenue line. The seam is maintained, paradoxically, by the unwillingness of great-power actors to resolve their competing industrial policy logics making the African seam-worker structurally persistent rather than transitional.

5. Contribution, Boundary Conditions, Limitations, and Future Research

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes three theoretical contributions. First, it introduces the seam-worker construct and the associated concept of geopolitical arbitrage as an entrepreneurship-specific analytical frame distinct from and not reducible to prior formulations in institutional voids (Khanna and Palepu, 1997; Mair and Marti, 2009), bricolage (Baker and Nelson, 2005; Senyard et al., 2014), or IB arbitrage (Ghemawat, 2001, 2003) literatures. The seam-worker fills a specific lacuna: no existing framework addresses the entrepreneur who derives competitive advantage from the deliberate non-convergence of geopolitical architectures as distinct from the exploitation of latent geographic or cultural distance.

Second, it repositions African entrepreneurship from a deficit-oriented to a geopolitically-agentive frame, consistent with empirical evidence that the continent is not a passive recipient of great-power competition but an active commercial participant in its fault lines (Leke, Chironga and Desvaux, 2018; Carmody, 2016). This repositioning has policy implications: it suggests that support for African entrepreneurship ecosystems should incorporate geopolitical literacy and institutional bilingualism as explicit capability targets, alongside conventional recommendations for infrastructure investment and regulatory reform.

Third, this paper establishes an explicit connection between macroeconomic accounts of geoeconomic fragmentation (Aiyar et al., 2023; Blackwill and Harris, 2016; Farrell and Newman, 2019) and micro-level entrepreneurial behaviour a bridge that neither the international political economy literature nor the entrepreneurship literature has previously constructed in systematic terms. This interdisciplinary movement is the paper's most significant disciplinary contribution.

5.2 Boundary Conditions

Seam-working is not universally available or uniformly productive, and four boundary conditions are analytically important.

Minimum capability threshold. Operating across incompatible institutional logics simultaneously requires managerial bilingualism, regulatory literacy, and sufficient organisational slack to maintain parallel configurations. Below a minimum resource threshold, attempting to straddle regimes may expose ventures to the full compliance costs of both without capturing the arbitrage premium of either. The seam-worker construct is most applicable to ventures at or beyond early commercial viability.

Regime stability dependence. Seams persist only so long as divergence between regimes is maintained. If the US-China technology relationship stabilises toward a new bilateral settlement, Type II seam-working opportunities narrow. If dollar-based correspondent banking is reformed through multilateral mechanisms to restore African FX access, Type I seams compress. The seam-worker's strategic horizon is structurally contingent on the durability of geopolitical fragmentation an uncertainty that this paper acknowledges but cannot resolve.

Normative limits. Type IV seam-working, in particular, operates proximate to legal and ethical boundaries. This paper analytically distinguishes between seam-working as a structural phenomenon and normative endorsement of any specific strategy. Regulatory arbitrage involving sanctions evasion, money laundering, or related illicit activities is beyond the scope of the seam-worker construct as defined here. The ethical cartography of permissible seam-working is a problem for future normative scholarship.

Geographic and sectoral scope. The illustrative cases draw on West and East African fintech and hardware contexts. Generalisability to other African sub-regions, to sectors such as agribusiness, professional services, or infrastructure, and to other peripheral regions including Southeast Asia and Central America warrants separate empirical investigation.

5.3 Limitations

This paper is explicitly conceptual and developmental. The mini-cases are illustrative composites constructed from secondary sources and do not constitute empirical tests of the framework. No causal identification is claimed or implied. The typology is a first-order analytical tool designed for generativity rather than completeness; real ventures likely combine elements of multiple types in configurations the four-type schema does not fully capture. The absence of direct primary data on seam-worker cognition how entrepreneurs actually perceive and strategise around geopolitical divergence is the most significant empirical gap this paper opens rather than closes.

5.4 Future Research Directions

Four lines of inquiry emerge from this framework. First, primary research using ethnographic or comparative case methods to document seam-worker cognition and strategy in situ how entrepreneurs perceive geopolitical divergence, how they build institutional bilingualism, and how they manage the exposure of operating across competing regime logics. Second, quantitative operationalisation of geopolitical arbitrage as a firm-level construct, potentially cross-referencing transaction-level payment data, export destination records, and compliance portfolio configurations against sanctions and standards regime mapping. Third, comparative extension of the seam-worker framework beyond Africa to other peripheral regions, testing where the typology travels intact and where it requires theoretical modification. Fourth, normative and policy analysis of the governance implications of seam-workingspecifically, how multilateral institutions and regional bodies such as the African Union and AfCFTA bodies might reorient toward seam-working ventures as ecosystem assets rather than regulatory risks.

If the structural condition of multipolarity is durable and the weight of current evidence suggests it is (Mearsheimer, 2019; Aiyar et al., 2023) then the seam-worker is not an anomaly to be explained away within existing frameworks. It is a harbinger of a new mode of entrepreneurial agency that theorists of emerging market entrepreneurship have not yet adequately conceptualised. The institutional voids paradigm served a productive generation of scholars well. The multipolar order demands a new theoretical grammar, and the seam-worker is its opening move.

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INTERSTITIAL LEADERSHIP: EXERCISING AUTHORITY IN THE GAPS BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICAN ORGANISATIONS

A Developmental Conference Paper

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Abstract

Leadership in African organisations operates at a persistent institutional crossroads where formal bureaucratic structures and informal orders kinship obligation, patronage, negotiated authority continuously overlap and compete. Existing scholarship either pathologises this condition as a governance deficit or romanticises it through indigenous philosophical frameworks. This paper introduces a third framing: interstitial leadership, defined as the exercise of authority in the overlapping space where formal and informal institutional orders coexist and mutually constitute each other. Drawing on institutional theory, legitimacy scholarship, and African management studies, the paper develops two original constructs interstitial leadership and the legitimacy portfolio and proposes a typology illustrated through three composite vignettes. It argues that skilled leadership in institutionally plural environments consists not in resolving multiplicity but in actively managing a portfolio of partly incompatible legitimacy sources across legal-bureaucratic, traditional, relational, and performance-based dimensions.

Keywords: *interstitial leadership, legitimacy portfolio, institutional multiplicity, African organisations, informal institutions, authority*

Introduction: The Puzzle of Leading Across Institutional Orders

African organisations are characterised, to an unusual degree, by institutional multiplicity: the simultaneous operation of formal and informal rules, norms, and authority structures that are not merely coexistent but actively entangled (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). A district hospital director reports upward through a Ministry of Health performance management hierarchy while managing the informal authority of a politically connected board chair and maintaining the confidence of a local chief whose endorsement affects community uptake of health services. An SME founder navigates company law alongside preferential employment expectations from a rotating savings association that provided start-up capital, and family demands that sit uncomfortably alongside formal governance requirements. A local government official holds a statutory mandate from the central state while managing the parallel legitimacy claims of traditional rulers, party patrons, and an increasingly vocal citizenry.

These configurations are not aberrations or residues of incomplete institutional modernisation. They are structural features of how authority is organised across much of sub-Saharan Africa and, arguably, across many non-Western and transitional contexts (Boso et al., 2023; Harris et al., 2022). Yet leadership scholarship has struggled to build cumulative theory that takes this condition seriously as a positive analytical object rather than a problem to be corrected or a tradition to be celebrated.

Two dominant framings have structured the literature. The first is the deficit framing: informal institutions patronage, kinship obligation, negotiated rather than rule-bound authority are treated as deviations from an ideal bureaucratic order, pathologies that strong or professionally trained leadership should overcome (see critique in Nkomo, 2011). The implied prescription is familiar: import and strengthen formal institutions, professionalise management, reduce discretionary power. The second is the recovery framing: drawing on indigenous philosophical frameworks most prominently Ubuntu (umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu: a person is a person through other persons) scholars and practitioners retrieve an alternative moral logic for authority and solidarity (Mangaliso et al., 2021). Ubuntu scholarship has produced important insights about the relational foundations of authority in African contexts, but its normative emphasis tends to romanticise rather than analyse institutional plurality.

Both framings share a common limitation: they treat the coexistence of formal and informal institutions as a temporary or exceptional condition rather than the normal terrain within which leaders in many African organisations routinely work. Neither framing equips scholars or practitioners with concepts adequate to the actual work of exercising authority when multiple institutional orders are simultaneously in play.

This paper introduces a third framing. The space between and across competing institutional orders is not merely a gap, disorder, or tradition. It is an analytically distinct organisational terrain. Leaders who navigate this terrain successfully do so not by resolving institutional tension but by actively managing a legitimacy portfolio: a repertoire of partly incompatible legitimacy sources that are selectively deployed across contexts. We term this practice interstitial leadership. The paper develops these constructs, proposes a preliminary typology, and outlines a programme of empirical research.

2. Theoretical Positioning

2.1 Informal Institutions and Institutional Multiplicity

The distinction between formal institutions (codified rules enforced by official bodies) and informal institutions (socially shared rules enforced through social mechanisms) is foundational in comparative politics and institutional economics (Helmke and Levitsky, 2004). In many African states, the relationship between these two orders is characterised not by substitution whereby informal rules fill gaps where formal rules are absent but by active coexistence: informal rules operate alongside, sometimes contrary to, and sometimes through formal structures (Harris et al., 2022; Honig, 2024).

This coexistence has been extensively documented in African political science: the persistence of neopatrimonial networks within formal bureaucratic structures, the continued authority of traditional leaders alongside elected local government, and the negotiation of customary and statutory obligations by officials and citizens alike (Sebu, 2025; Olaopa and Ogundare, 2023). What has received less theoretical attention is the leadership work performed by actors who must operate across these institutional registers simultaneously not as occasional code-switchers but as a routine feature of their role. Harris et al. (2022) demonstrate empirically that in African bureaucracies, high-status social actors routinely activate patron networks to supplement formal authority, yielding organisational outcomes that formal institutional theory struggles to account for.

2.2 Institutional Logics, Hybridity, and Interstitial Space

Institutional logics theory offers a framework for understanding how actors navigate environments shaped by competing institutional orders (Lounsbury et al., 2021). The concept of hybridity organisations and actors that span multiple logics has become central to this literature (Corbett-Etchevers et al., 2024; Bonomi et al., 2020). Hybrid organisations selectively couple elements from competing logics, and the actors who manage them develop distinctive capacities for navigating institutional complexity.

The notion of interstitial space the domain where competing institutional orders overlap, generating ambiguity, creative possibility, and structural tension provides a key conceptual anchor for this paper. Rather than treating hybrid actors as simply positioned between logics, the interstitial framing emphasises the generative character of the overlap: the space between logics is itself structured, inhabited, and navigated through skilled practice. The leader who operates in this space is not merely a mediator or boundary spanner but an active author of institutional arrangements what has been called, in related literatures, an institutional entrepreneur or institutional worker.

2.3 Sources of Legitimacy and Authority

Authority in organisations ultimately rests on legitimacy: the generalised perception that the actions of an actor are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions (Suchman, 199). Weber's (1978) tripartite typology legal-rational, traditional, and charismatic authority remains the most widely cited schema, but it was not designed to account for leaders who must simultaneously hold multiple, partly incompatible legitimacy bases in institutional environments where none of these types is fully dominant.

Recent scholarship has extended legitimacy theory toward dynamic, contested, and relational accounts. Haack and Sieweke (2018) demonstrate how legitimacy operates not as a stable endowment but as an ongoing social accomplishment requiring active management. Schumacher et al. (2022) show empirically that leaders in contexts of limited formal authority enact legitimacy through deliberate relational and symbolic strategies rather than positional power. These developments provide important theoretical resources for the legitimacy portfolio construct developed below, but they have not been systematically applied to institutional multiplicity in African organisational settings.

2.4 African Management Scholarship: Achievements and Gaps

African management studies have made significant advances in documenting the distinctiveness of organisational life in African contexts and challenging universalist assumptions in mainstream management theory (Nkomo, 2011; Mangaliso et al., 2021). The Ubuntu tradition, in particular, has produced a rich account of the relational and communitarian foundations of authority and decision-making in many African cultural contexts. However, the dominant strand of this literature has been normative rather than analytical: it prescribes a leadership model rather than theorising leadership as practice within specific institutional configurations. What is needed is a framework that treats institutional multiplicity as an analytical object — a structured terrain with its own logic and demands. The constructs developed in the next section are intended to contribute to that project.

3. The Interstitial Leadership Framework

3.1 Defining Interstitial Leadership

Interstitial leadership is defined as the exercise of authority in the overlapping space where formal and informal institutional orders coexist and mutually constitute each other. Three definitional elements warrant attention.

First, space. The interstitial zone is not simply the absence of institutional order; it is a structured field defined by the overlap of at least two institutional orders, each of which retains its own logic, membership criteria, and legitimacy claims. This field is characterised by ambiguity (the rules of engagement are not fully specified by either order), creativity (actors have degrees of freedom unavailable in more fully institutionalised settings), and risk (the costs of misjudged moves are real and can be severe).

Second, authority. Interstitial leadership involves the exercise of authority the capacity to shape the decisions, actions, and commitments of others in conditions where the grounds of that authority are continuously contested and must be actively reproduced. This distinguishes interstitial leadership from adjacent concepts such as boundary spanning, cultural brokering, or stakeholder management.

Third, institutional orders. The interstitial framework does not privilege formal over informal institutions, or vice versa. Both are treated as structurally real and operationally present. The analytical task is to understand how leaders manage the simultaneous demands, expectations, and legitimacy claims emanating from each order.

3.2 The Legitimacy Portfolio Construct

The central mechanism through which interstitial leadership is exercised is the legitimacy portfolio: the repertoire of legitimacy sources that a leader holds simultaneously and draws on selectively as circumstances require. Building on Weber's (1978) authority typology and Suchman's (1995) legitimacy management framework, and extending both in light of the demands of institutional multiplicity, this paper proposes four legitimacy sources that constitute the portfolio in African organisational contexts:

1. Legal-bureaucratic legitimacy: authority derived from formal position, rule-based procedures, and codified accountability structures. This source is primary in relation to the formal state or corporate institutional order.

2. Traditional legitimacy: authority derived from ascriptive identity, customary norms, and the endorsement of recognised traditional or community structures. In many African contexts, this source retains significant organisational force beyond its formal legal standing (Honig, 2024; Olaopa and Ogundare, 2023).

3. Relational legitimacy: authority derived from the quality, history, and reciprocity of interpersonal ties including patron-client relationships, ethnic solidarity networks, and trust-based associations (Harris et al., 2022; Boso et al., 2023).

4. Performance-based legitimacy: authority derived from demonstrated results — the delivery of tangible benefits, the visible resolution of collective problems, or the creation of shared value (Schumacher et al., 2022).

These four sources are partly incompatible. The demonstrable performance accountability demanded by a formal ministry may conflict with the patronage obligations expected by relational networks; traditional legitimacy may rest on non-negotiable hierarchy that sits in tension with the participatory proceduralism of formal governance. The skill of interstitial leadership lies not in eliminating these tensions but in actively managing the portfolio: knowing which source to foreground in which context, how to draw on one source without fatally undermining another, and when the portfolio configuration needs to be actively reconstructed.

3.3 Portfolio Management as Leadership Practice

Portfolio management, in this framework, is an active and skilled practice comprising at minimum three sub-competencies. The first is contextual reading: the capacity to identify which institutional order is most salient in a given interaction and what legitimacy claims are operative. The second is source switching: the ability to shift the foregrounded legitimacy source fluidly and without appearing incoherent a significant communicative and symbolic achievement. The third is portfolio maintenance: the ongoing work of sustaining each legitimacy source through continued investment (attending community events, meeting formal reporting requirements, sustaining reciprocal ties), even when a particular source is not immediately foregrounded.

These sub-competencies together constitute a form of institutional artisanship: practical knowledge of the institutional terrain, combined with the ability to shape that terrain through skilled action.

4. A Preliminary Typology: Three Composite Vignettes

The following typology is organised around the mode of portfolio management the predominant strategy through which the leader manages tension between legitimacy sources. The three composite vignettes are constructed from reported organisational patterns in the African management literature rather than from primary fieldwork, and are offered as heuristic illustrations. Names are fictional.

Vignette 1: The Buffer - Dr Amara, Public Hospital Director

Dr Amara leads a district hospital in a West African country. Her formal authority derives from a Ministry of Health appointment, subject to performance management, procurement regulations, and audit obligations. In practice, her capacity to operate depends additionally on her relationship with the traditional ruler of the surrounding community and with a party-aligned board chair whose informal authority is absent from any organisational chart.

Dr Amara's portfolio management strategy is buffering: she actively maintains distinct domains within which different legitimacy sources are foregrounded, minimising cross-domain contamination. Formal reporting to the Ministry operates through prescribed channels on prescribed terms; engagements with the traditional ruler follow customary protocols entirely; political negotiations with the board chair are managed through discreet bilateral conversations. The risk of the buffering strategy is role overload and the possibility that contradictions, suppressed rather than resolved, will periodically erupt.

Vignette 2: The Sequencer - Emmanuel, SME Founder

Emmanuel founded a medium-sized logistics company in East Africa, using capital partly assembled through a rotating savings association composed of kinship-linked members. His formal governance obligations company registration, tax compliance, employment contracts operate in one register; his obligations to the association, including preferential hiring and informal redistribution, operate in another.

Emmanuel's strategy is temporal sequencing: different legitimacy sources are foregrounded at different phases of the organisational lifecycle. The startup phase drew heavily on relational legitimacy; growth phases have progressively shifted emphasis toward performance-based and legal-bureaucratic sources. The sequencer faces a distinct risk: as formal legitimacy grows, informal creditors may feel displaced, generating resentment that can rupture the networks on which early resilience depended.

Vignette 3: The Conductor - Chief Kofi, District Assembly Member

Chief Kofi holds an elected seat on a District Assembly in Ghana alongside his status as a recognised sub-chief. His formal role demands procedural accountability, transparent voting, and constituency responsiveness; his traditional role demands consensus building, elder deference, and the protection of customary land arrangements. These are not always compatible (Sebu, 2025; Olaopa and Ogundare, 2023).

Chief Kofi's strategy is high-frequency switching: he moves rapidly between legitimacy registers within single encounters, reading each participant's expectations and foregrounding the appropriate source in real time. This strategy requires exceptional contextual reading and communicative skill. Its risk is perceived inconsistency or inauthenticity the suspicion, from any direction, that the actor is merely performing rather than holding genuine commitments.

5. Contributions, Limitations, and Future Research

5.1 Theoretical Contributions

This paper makes two primary theoretical contributions. First, it introduces interstitial leadership as a construct that repositions institutional multiplicity from a contextual nuisance or cultural resource to an analytically productive terrain. By defining leadership in relation to the structured overlap of institutional orders rather than in relation to either formal or informal institutions separately, the framework moves beyond both the deficit and recovery framings that have constrained African leadership scholarship (Nkomo, 2011; Mangaliso et al., 2021).

Second, it introduces the legitimacy portfolio as the mechanism through which interstitial leadership is exercised. The construct extends Weber's (1978) authority typology and Suchman's (1995) legitimacy management framework by specifying the conditions under which leaders must hold multiple, partly incompatible legitimacy sources simultaneously and manage them as an active portfolio. It adds a structural dimension the coexistence of formal and informal institutional orders that is underdeveloped in existing legitimacy theory (Haack and Sieweke, 2018; Schumacher et al., 2022).

Together, these constructs provide a conceptual vocabulary for comparative empirical research on leadership in institutional multiplicity: a vocabulary that is theoretically grounded, analytically precise, and capable of accommodating African organisational experience without either exoticising or homogenising it.

5.2 Limitations

The paper has several limitations that must be acknowledged. The three vignettes are composite constructions, not case studies; they illustrate typological distinctions rather than test them. The claim that skilled interstitial leadership can produce positive organisational outcomes remains theoretically asserted rather than empirically demonstrated, and the conditions under which portfolio management becomes unsustainable or counterproductive are not yet specified. The framework also requires testing across a wider range of African contexts — including Francophone, Lusophone, and North African settings before its scope can be assessed.

5.3 Future Research Agenda

Four empirical priorities follow from this paper. First, in-depth qualitative studies of leaders identified by peers and subordinates as particularly effective navigators of institutional multiplicity examining portfolio management strategies in practice. Second, comparative studies of portfolio composition across sectors (health, local government, private enterprise) and regions, to assess whether the four legitimacy sources identified here are exhaustive and whether their relative weight varies systematically. Third, longitudinal studies of portfolio trajectories, examining how configurations change across organisational lifecycles and political transitions. Fourth, attention to failure cases: leaders whose portfolios collapsed or generated perverse outcomes, and the conditions that produced those failures.

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Note on empirical evidence: As noted in text, the empirical evidence base for effective leadership practices within neopatrimonial institutional structures is thin, and claims about the generalisability of the legitimacy portfolio typology should be treated as theoretical propositions awaiting empirical scrutiny.

Note on vignettes: The three composite vignettes are constructed from patterns reported in the African management literature. They are intended as illustrative typological anchors, not as case study evidence.

INVESTIGATING THE INVASION OF CHINA-PRINTED ADIRE DESIGN IN THE NIGERIAN INDIGENOUS TEXTILE MARKET

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Abstract

The growing emergence of China-printed Adire fabrics has raised concerns about the sustainability of Nigeria's indigenous textile industry and the survival of Yoruba culture. This study investigated the implications of China-printed Adire for indigenous producers by examining its economic effects, influence on consumer preferences, impact on cultural authenticity, and strategies for sustaining traditional Adire production. A qualitative descriptive–interpretive research design was used. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with eleven purposively selected indigenous Adire artisans in Osogbo, Osun State, Nigeria, and analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings showed that the import of Adire produced in China has significantly affected artisans' sales, income, and market competitiveness, thereby putting the economic viability of indigenous textile companies under threat. Participants also said that there is a general awareness among consumers of the cultural importance of authentic Adire, but that the affordability of machine-printed products has become an important determinant of their purchase decisions. The results also show that the availability of imported copies undermines interest in traditional craft, the symbolic value of genuine Adire, and supports the commercialisation of indigenous culture. The participants suggested intellectual property rights protection, product certification, consumer awareness campaigns, government control over the import of counterfeit products, and strategic digital branding as key measures to protect the authenticity of Adire. The study adds to the literature on Cultural Heritage, the Creative Economy, and Cultural Commodification Theory with empirical evidence on how imported cultural imitations simultaneously transform producers' livelihoods, consumer behaviours, and heritage preservation. The results provide actionable recommendations for policymakers, cultural institutions, and industry stakeholders interested in improving the sustainability and competitiveness of Nigeria's indigenous textile industry in international markets.

Keywords: *Adire; China-printed textiles; Cultural Commodification Theory; Nigeria Indigenous textile industry; Cultural heritage*

Introduction

This study focuses on the Invasion of China-Printed Adire design in the Nigerian indigenous textile market. The globalisation of cultural products has intensified the tension between commercial expansion and the preservation of indigenous cultural heritage. In many developing countries, traditional crafts now face competition from the industrial reproduction of local craft designs, which are more affordable and accessible to the market (Alkharafi & Alsabah, 2025; Crane, 2016; Robinson, 2007). While globalisation has fostered opportunities for cultural exchange and creative entrepreneurship, it has also prompted increased commercialisation of indigenous cultural products, potentially endangering the sector's sustainability, cultural authenticity, and heritage preservation (Urbaite, 2024; Wang & Fouseki, 2025). In various local textile traditions around the world, such as Batik from Indonesia, Kente from Ghana, and Adire from Nigeria, the problem of "imitations" of handmade originals by mass-produced cloth is evident.

Adire is among the most acclaimed indigenous fabrics and a permanent emblem of Yoruba cultural identity in Nigeria. Adire is produced using traditional resist-dyeing methods that embody artistic creativity, indigenous knowledge, and symbolic expression passed down through generations (Areo & Kalilu, 2013; Adepeko & Lawal, 2025). Apart from its cultural value, Adire is a significant contributor to Nigeria's creative economy, providing jobs and income for artisans, traders, designers and small-scale entrepreneurs, and promoting cultural tourism and international recognition of African fashion (Ojelade et al., 2018; Chloe, 2023; Esuga & Nnabuenyi, 2025).

However, with the emergence of China-printed Adire fabrics on the Nigerian textile market, the sustainability of indigenous Adire production is under threat (Diyaolu, 2025). They are imported textiles that copy traditional Adire designs and can be produced in large quantities at a much lower price than handmade cloths. Thus, their low cost and accessibility have ushered in greater competition for indigenous producers who are labour-intensive (Omotosho et al., 2015; Owa et al., 2024). The available evidence points to a decline in patronage of genuine Adire, reduced profitability, and concerns about the sustainability of indigenous textile businesses (Olaiya, 2023; Bankole, 2024).

The economic impact of the spread of China-printed Adire is not the only challenge it poses; culture is, too. Authentic Adire is not just a textile product; it represents historical narratives, indigenous knowledge and symbolic meaning that are integral to Yoruba cultural identity (Oyeniyi, 2015; Oke, 2017). While imported imitations share the visual aesthetics of Adire, they may lack the cultural stories and artisanal methods found in traditional production processes (Omoyele, 2023; Rice, 2020). This increasing adoption of these imitations has consequences such as cultural dilution, diminished appreciation for traditional craftsmanship, and the commodification of indigenous heritage (Wang & Fouseki, 2025; Ciafe, 2024).

While there have been studies that focused on the cultural significance of Adire, technological innovation, entrepreneurship and the overall impact of foreign textile imports (Omotosho et al., 2015; Ojelade et al., 2018; Owa et al., 2024 and Olaoyenikan, 2024), these have been mostly studied separately. However, little empirical evidence exists to account for the interplay between the economic marginalisation of indigenous producers, consumer preferences and cultural erasure in the case of China-printed Adire. This study fills this gap by investigating the lived experience of indigenous Adire makers, offering a holistic account of how the economic and cultural dimensions of China-printed Adire interweave, and outlining viable ways to bolster the authenticity, competitiveness, and continuing preservation of Nigeria's indigenous textile tradition by adopting Cultural Commodification Theory.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. Examine the economic effect of China-printed Adire on Nigerian indigenous textile producers

2. Investigate the cultural implications of China-printed Adire in terms of the preservation of traditional Adire heritage and authenticity.

3. Explore the impact of China-printed Adire on consumer preference and purchasing habits.

4. Identify sustainable strategies for preserving and promoting authentic Adire production in Nigeria.

Literature Review

This section presents key underpinning theories, provides conceptual and empirical reviews of the literature, identifies the knowledge gap, and highlights the ways in which this study contributes to current knowledge.

2.1 Conceptual Review

2.1.1 Adire as Indigenous Textile Heritage

Adire is one of Nigeria's most resilient indigenous textile traditions and encapsulates cultural identity, artistic expression, and economic livelihood. Adire is traditionally made using natural indigo through resist-dyeing techniques, which involve the transfer of indigenous knowledge through the apprenticeship system and communal practice (Areo & Kalilu, 2013; Diyaolu, 2025). In addition to its decorative function, scholars now view Adire as a cultural treasure that narrates Yoruba history, social values, and symbolic meanings (Adepeko & Lawal, 2025). Its incorporation into current fashion and cultural tourism has created new commercial avenues, but it has also raised concerns about the commercialisation of heritage and the preservation of traditional manufacturing methods (Braide, 2016; Esuga & Nnabuenyi, 2025). Adire is therefore not only an economic product but also a cultural repository, and the tension between the economic imperative of expansion and the need to protect heritage makes it unique.

2.1.2 Globalisation and Indigenous Creative Industries

Globalisation has transformed the indigenous creative industry in terms of market accessibility and competitive pressures, especially through access to foreign and diverse products (Boada et al., 2025). Technological development and international trade have facilitated broader exposure of indigenous cultural products, creating opportunities for entrepreneurship and economic development (Alkharafi & Alsabah, 2025). On the other hand, critics argue that globalisation hastens cultural uniformity by making local industries vulnerable to mass-produced products that can mimic indigenous products at much lower prices (Urbaite, 2024). This duality implies that globalisation has both positive and negative aspects and that its impact depends on the adaptive capacity of indigenous producers and the institutional frameworks in place to safeguard cultural resources. Thus, globalisation offers both opportunities and threats to the sustainability of traditional creative industries (Fauzan, 2025; Srai et al., 2020).

2.1.3 China's Influence in African Textile Markets

The growing influence of Chinese products in African textile markets provides a clear illustration of the multifaceted nature of globalisation and indigenous industrial development. Chinese companies have been able to offer low-cost textiles to meet rising demand due to economies of scale and advanced manufacturing capabilities (Altenburg et al., 2020). But the copying of African-inspired creations is raising an alarm about cultural appropriation and market displacement. While lower-priced imports make them more accessible to consumers, they also undermine the competitiveness of indigenous producers, which still rely on labour-intensive production processes (Olaoyenikan, 2024; Owa et al., 2024). This tension is not only economic but also encompasses issues of ownership, authenticity, and the sustainability of indigenous cultural production.

2.1.4 Consumption of Culture and Consumer Behaviour

Consumer behaviour in cultural markets is a product of the interplay between economic rationality and cultural identity. According to conventional consumer theory, price, quality, and utility are the main factors determining consumer purchasing decisions, especially in resource-limited economies (Owa et al., 2024). But in the literature on cultural consumption, authenticity, symbolic meaning and social identity are also important aspects of the value of heritage products (Oyeniyi, 2015; Rice, 2020). Essentially, consumers generally don't choose one or the other; rather, they negotiate between the two. This interaction explains why patronage of imported imitation Adire is still sought, even though the genuine handcrafted textiles (Omoyele, 2023; Waddell, 2017) are well known. Therefore, if indigenous Adire is to be understood as sustainable, one must look at consumers' behaviour, which is part of a larger process of cultural commodification, globalisation, and market competition (Crane, 2016).

2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Cultural Commodification Theory

Cultural Commodification Theory is an interdisciplinary synthesis of Marxist political economy, the Frankfurt School's cultural critiques, and anthropological studies of tourism. The foundation studies establishing this theory can be traced to the works of Karl Max (1867) and Theodor Adorno & Max Horkheimer (1944).The theory provides an understanding of how cultural symbols, traditions, practices, and artefacts are turned into commodities for exchange and the economy. It can be said that it is when cultural products hit the commercial market that their economic impact tends to be more accentuated than their social, historical and symbolic significance.

In essence, the theory proposes that the market forces affect the production, distribution and consumption of cultural products. As a result, cultural expressions that have heritage value may be modified, standardised, or reproduced to meet consumers' needs and maximise profit. Commodification may lead to greater visibility and economic viability of cultural products, but can also undermine their authenticity and cultural significance.The theory is therefore pertinent to Adire production, as traditional Adire is now a traded fashion product, whereas it was initially a cultural practice of a community.

With the growing popularity of Adire, large-scale manufacturers have been able to make copies of indigenous designs for commercial purposes. This is clearly seen in the emergence of China-printed Adire, which now reproduces traditional motifs using industrial techniques to sell at lower prices in a wider market.Cultural Commodification Theory also addresses cultural commercialisation and cultural authenticity. Commercialisation can increase market access and consumer preference, but excessive replication and bulk production can take Adire away from its cultural identity, indigenous knowledge, craftsmanship, and symbolic narratives. Therefore, the theory can be useful in understanding how economic interests can affect the maintenance or destruction of the traditional Adire heritage.

2.3 Empirical Review

Key studies over the past decade (2015-2025) have yielded interesting findings that highlight challenges within the indigenous Adire market, offering unique insights into the state of play. As a case in point, Esuga and Nnabuenyi (2025) explored how cultural entrepreneurship can foster cultural exchange, using the Adire guilds of Abeokuta, Nigeria, as a case study. The study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing interviews and documentary analysis, and revealed that the Adire guilds play significant roles in the preservation of indigenous knowledge, cultural entrepreneurship, and international market access. However, the study identified globalisation, counterfeit products, and weak institutional protection as threats to the long-term sustainability and authenticity of indigenous Adire production.

Similarly, Ojelade et al. (2018) studied the uniqueness, production technology and socio-cultural relevance of Adire in Osogbo, Nigeria. Based on a qualitative case study using field observations and interviews with artisans, the study concluded that Adire remains a significant cultural heritage and livelihood, although it is at risk of unsustainability due to modernisation and waning indigenous patronage. In their study, Omotosho et al. (2015) examined factors affecting technological innovation in the Adire Textile industry of Southwestern Nigeria. Through a survey research design and structured questionnaires, the study found that technology, skills acquisition, and access to financial and government assistance positively affected the levels of innovation and productivity among indigenous producers.

Olaoyenikan (2024) explored possible solutions to the onslaught of low-priced foreign textiles through Adire mass production. Qualitative interviews and industry observations indicated that indigenous Adire can be made more competitive through innovation, product diversification, technological adaptation, and strategic branding, without losing its cultural authenticity.Ajiginni & Bakare (2022) studied the use of Adire fabric used in designing contemporary wedding gowns in Nigerian society. The study revealed through the use of a descriptive survey design with its two respondents, fashion designers and consumers, that Adire has been accepted in the fashion of today because of its aesthetic appeal, cultural symbolism and versatility. But the authors noted that it still faces challenges before its large-scale commercialisation due to poor innovation, variability in print quality and cheaper printed alternatives.

Finally, a study that considered the relevant contexts covered in this paper was conducted by Owa and colleagues (2024), who examined the impact of economic relations between China and Nigeria on Nigeria's textile industry from 2006 to 2017. Based on historical and documentary analysis and secondary economic data, the study revealed that even though the trade relationship with China improved, the rise in Chinese textile imports intensified competition, reduced the competitiveness of domestic textile companies, and led to industrial decline.

2.4 Research Gap

Past studies have documented the cultural importance, historical development, entrepreneurial potentials and technological advancement of adire in Nigeria's indigenous textile industry (Adepeko & Lawal, 2025; Areo & Kalilu, 2013; Diyaolu, 2025; Ojelade et al., 2018; Omotosho et al., 2015; Saheed, 2013). In recent years, the impact of globalisation, foreign textile imports, cultural entrepreneurship, and China–Nigeria trade relations on the sustainability of indigenous textiles have also been explored (Owa et al., 2024; Olaoyenikan, 2024; Esuga & Nnabuenyi, 2025; Alkharafi & Alsabah, 2025). However, most of these studies focus on these aspects separately, and few have taken into account the economic, cultural, and consumer dimensions related to China-printed Adire.

Furthermore, empirical evidence and stakeholders' experiences regarding the impact of imported imitations on indigenous producers, cultural authenticity, consumer purchase behaviour, and heritage protection remain limited (Wang & Fouseki, 2025; Omoyele, 2023; Waddell, 2017). To bridge this gap, this study adopted qualitative thematic analysis as the research methodology to integrate the invasion of China-printed Adire and to suggest a sustainable approach to preserving the authenticity and competitiveness of indigenous Adire production in Nigeria.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopted a qualitative descriptive–interpretive research design to examine the implications of China-printed Adire on Nigeria's indigenous textile market. The design was considered appropriate because it facilitates an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and interpretations of socio-cultural and economic phenomena within their natural setting. Qualitative descriptive inquiry is more appropriate for studies that aim to describe the problem and gain deep context and insights into complex cultural issues than to draw statistical generalisations (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3.2 Study Area

The study was carried out in Osogbo of Osun State, Nigeria, which is one of the leading centres of traditional Adire weaving. The city was purposefully chosen because of its historical background concerning the craft of Adire, the availability of experienced artisans and the continuity of indigenous textile heritage in the city.

3.3 Participants and Sampling

Eleven (11) indigenous Adire artisans were selected, including six (6) master Adire producers, three (3) experienced Adire artisans and two (2) workshop owners with 8-30 years of experience in traditional Adire production. Purposive sampling was used to select participants, as they have extensive knowledge of the phenomenon under study and firsthand experience with it. The small sample size was deemed suitable given the sample's homogeneity and the research focus. With information power in mind, participants with extensive experience with the study's content were selected to provide rich and relevant data (Malterud et al., 2016). Data collection continued until data saturation was reached, and no new codes or themes were identified in subsequent interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

3.4 Data Collection

The primary data were obtained through face-to-face interviews using a semi-structured protocol, formulated based on the study objectives and the literature. The protocol included participants' perceptions of the economic impacts of China-printed Adire, cultural authenticity, consumer buying behaviour, and strategies for sustaining indigenous production. The semi-structured interview was chosen because it allows flexibility to explore issues as they arise and ensures uniformity of interview responses (Kallio et al., 2016). Interviews were held at participants' workshops and business premises from March to April 2026 and took about 25–45 minutes each, depending on the participant's choice of language, ranging from English to Yoruba. All interviews were audio-recorded and, with the participant's permission, supplemented by detailed field notes to capture contextual observations and non-verbal expressions.

3.5 Data Analysis

The interview data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, a process that involved six phases as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2021). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim, and those conducted in Yoruba were translated into English for analysis. The transcripts were then read multiple times to become familiar with the data, and initial codes were then generated inductively. Later, similar codes were clustered into larger categories and recoded into themes. Themes were reviewed, defined, and interpreted in line with the study objectives and the Cultural Commodification Theory to ensure conceptual coherence and elaboration.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles. The study received approval from the appropriate institutional research ethics committee before data collection began. Participants were given detailed information about the study's purpose and provided written informed consent before participating. All participation was voluntary, and participants were told they could drop out of the study at any time without negative repercussions. Efforts were made to maintain confidentiality and anonymity by assigning pseudonyms to participants, removing all identifying information from the interview transcripts, and securely storing and password-protecting electronic data for academic purposes only, in accordance with accepted qualitative research ethics (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

4. Results and Discussion

Interviews with eleven indigenous Adire makers revealed four interrelated themes that account for the economic, cultural, and market implications of China-printed Adire and how it can be sustained to thrive in the production of authentic Adire.

Theme 1: Adverse Impacts

There is an economic impact of China-Printed Adire on indigenous producers. All the participants agreed that the introduction of China-printed Adire has significantly diminished patronage of handmade fabrics. The majority cited reduced sales due to lower prices and the increased availability of imported alternatives. One participant stated that “many of the customers now ask for the Chinese version because it is cheaper, even though they know that our own is the original version”(Participant 3). Another said, “We work for days to make one, so when they are sold, imported ones are sold quickly as they are cheaper” (Participant 8). Participants noted that individual enterprises have been adversely affected by declining revenues, resulting in diminished production levels, profits, and apprenticeship opportunities, and jeopardising the sustainability of indigenous companies.This confirms the findings of Owa et al. (2024) and Olaoyenikan (2024), who found that Chinese textile imports have made Nigeria's textile industry uncompetitive. They also add to the work of Omotosho et al. (2015), who have shown that it is not only about technical capacity but also about the sustainability of the indigenous creative economy at the economic level.

Theme 2: Changing consumer buying behaviour

There has been a change in consumerpreferences and market dynamics due to both increased awareness and ignorance, as well as changes in product pricing. For instance, Participants felt that affordability has become more important than authenticity for consumers. While handcrafted Adire was seen as culturally superior, participants felt that many buyers lacked the ability to distinguish it from machine-printed versions. One artisan stated, "Many young buyers don't know the difference, when it looks nice, they buy it" (Participant 5). However, some respondents suggested that the influx of fabrics has made people more aware of Adire, providing better avenues for producers and opportunities to effectively publicise their work and sell it as genuine.

These sentiments corroborate Ajiginni and Bakare (2022), who stressed the commercial attractiveness of Adire, and are those of Oyeniyi (2015) and Waddell (2017), who stated that the extent of cultural consumption results from the intersection of economic pressures and cultural identity. Results further indicate that consumer awareness is an important factor in market competitiveness. Since a recent study by Boada and colleagues (2025) showed that brand advertising had less impact than product and price factors, indigenous markets need to adopt a more targeted approach. This implies that Nigerian indigenous markets would have to improve their promotion of authentic Adire by adopting a promotional mix that reaches their audience, particularly a combination of public relations techniques to enhance consumers’ awareness of indigenous Adire, and build credibility; along with digital marketing, sales promotion that could target price-sensitive customers and advertising that targets a broader market due to scalability and reach (Marsh, 2026).

Theme 3: Erosion of cultural heritage

There are fears of adverse cultural implications and the erosion of cultural heritage, as participants worryabout the loss of the cultural values of the traditional printing process in the face of China-printed Adire. One participant said, "Chinese Adire copies the pattern, but not the story of it" (Participant 2). Another participant said, “If the younger generation is only purchasing printed copies, then they will never learn what Adire is really about” (Participant 10). Participants stated that the rising trend of imported imitations undermines an interest in local craftsmanship and jeopardises the passing on of traditional knowledge.These findings are similar to those of Areo & Kalilu (2013), Ojelade et al. (2018), and Oke (2017). Adire is a storehouse of Yoruba history and symbolism. They also reflect the Cultural Commodification Theory, which shows that the degree of commercialisation leads to the replacement of cultural meaning with exchange value and the acceleration of the commodification of indigenous heritage (Crane, 2016).This calls for an accelerated effort towardsenhancing identification with Adire, which, if promoted as part of a cultural identity, could go a long way in enhancing sales, especially since consumption of the product/Adire is a pathway for preserving the cultural identity (Boada et al., 2025).

Theme 4: Sustenance Strategies

The results present strategies for sustaining indigenous Adire, with participants offering suggestions for protecting authentic Adire. IP protection, product certification, regulation of counterfeit imports, consumer awareness and enhanced digital marketing are the most common recommendations. One interviewee said, “If there is an official certification for Adire, then the consumers will know what they are buying” (Participant 6). Another one added, "We have to sell our stories online, not only our fabrics" (Participant 9).This has been emphasised by Diyaolu (2025), Esuga and Nnabuenyi (2025), and Wang and Fouseki (2025), who recommend integrated institutional and market-based approaches to cultural sustainability. The results show that sustaining Adire requires a balance between commercial innovation and safeguarding its cultural authenticity. Indigenous producers need to embrace globalisation rather than reject it and draw on certification, branding, and digital platforms to enhance the competitiveness and global visibility of authentic Nigerian Adire. Finally, given that tradition is a decisive factor for consumers, indicative of a strong attachment to their culture (Boada et al., 2025), indigenous producers also need to draw on these attachments when promoting their products.

Conclusion and Implications

5.1 Conclusion

This study was conducted to unravel the implications of China-printed Adire for the indigenous textile market in Nigeria, using qualitative thematic analysis of the experiences of traditional Adire makers in Osogbo, Osun State. The results indicate that the influx of imported Adire products has significantly reduced patronage of original Adire, thereby reducing artisans' earnings and the competitiveness of indigenous textile businesses. In addition to the economic implications, the study shows that the rising trend in machine printing and other substitutes for Adire poses a challenge to Adire's cultural authenticity by undermining traditional craftsmanship, symbolic meanings, and the intergenerational transfer of indigenous knowledge. However, the results show that authentic Adire has great cultural and economic potential if supported by appropriate institutional, market, and policy interventions. Overall, the study's findings suggest that careful management and sustainable practices are essential for the long-term sustainability of Adire, and that the traditional craftsmanship of Nigerian textile production can continue to play an important role in the country's creative economy and cultural heritage.

5.2 Recommendations

Based on the study's results, it is recommended that a nationally recognised certification and authenticity label be established for handmade Adire to differentiate it from imported imitations. The government should strengthen IP protection and implement more stringent measures to combat the import of counterfeit textiles. Indigenous artisans should embrace digital marketing, product innovation, and collaborative branding to boost the visibility and competitiveness of their products. Consumer awareness programs should also be further strengthened to educate the public about the cultural relevance and economic value of genuine Adire through schools, cultural institutions, fashion shows, and the media. Moreover, ongoing training and capacity-building programmes should be offered to enhance artisans' entrepreneurial, technological, and marketing skills.

5.3 Policy Implications

Based on the findings, it is recommended that indigenous textile development be integrated into Nigeria's overall cultural and creative economy. This involves designing trade policies that safeguard local artisans from unfair competition and preserve genuine Adire as a national cultural asset. Governments should promote the registration of geographical indications, improve linkages with artisan associations, and provide financial, technical, and innovation support to indigenous textile businesses. The foregoing policy measures would help in preserving culture, create jobs, and make Nigeria's indigenous textile industry globally competitive.

5.4 Future Research Directions

Comparative studies should be conducted among the major centres of Adire production, such as Abeokuta, Ibadan, and Kano, to assess differences in the impact of textile imitation imports across regions. Quantitative studies that explore the consumers' awareness, purchase behaviour and willingness to pay for authentic Adire would complement the qualitative findings of this study. Further studies should also investigate international market opportunities, branding strategies, and geographical indication (GI) systems that can bolster the export potential and sustainability of authentic Nigerian Adire.

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Appendix A
Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Study Title: Investigating the Implications of China-Printed Adire on Nigeria's Indigenous Textile Market

Introduction
Good day. Thank you for agreeing to participate in this interview. I am conducting a study on the implications of China-printed Adire for Nigeria's indigenous textile industry. The purpose of this interview is to understand your experiences and perspectives as an indigenous Adire artisan. Your participation is voluntary, and all information provided will be treated with strict confidentiality and used solely for academic purposes. With your permission, this interview will be audio-recorded to ensure the accuracy of your responses.

Estimated interview duration: 25–40 minutes.

Section A: Participant Background
- How long have you been involved in Adire production?
- What is your role in the Adire industry (e.g., producer, workshop owner, master dyer)?
- Can you briefly describe the nature of your Adire business?

Section B: Economic Implications of China-Printed Adire
- How has the increasing availability of China-printed Adire affected your business?

(Probe into: Sales, revenue, customer demand, production volume, employment).
- What changes have you observed in customer patronage over the past few years?
- In your opinion, what factors make China-printed Adire more attractive to some consumers?
- How have these imported fabrics affected the competitiveness of locally produced Adire?

Section C: Consumer Preference and Market Dynamics
- How do consumers generally distinguish between authentic handmade Adire and China-printed Adire?
- (Probe into: Awareness, quality, price, appearance, availability).
- To what extent do you think consumers value cultural authenticity when purchasing Adire?
- Have you observed any changes in consumer preferences over time? Please explain.

Section D: Cultural Implications
- What does authentic Adire represent to you and your community?
- In what ways do you think China-printed Adire affects the cultural identity and heritage associated with traditional Adire?
- Do you believe younger generations still appreciate the cultural significance of authentic Adire? Why or why not?

Section E: Sustainability and Future of Indigenous Adire
- What major challenges currently threaten the sustainability of indigenous Adire production?
- What strategies do you believe would best protect and promote authentic Adire?
- (Probe into: Intellectual property protection, certification, branding, government support, consumer education, digital marketing).
- What roles should government agencies, cultural institutions, artisan associations, and consumers play in preserving authentic Adire?

Section F: Closing Question
- Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the future of indigenous Adire or the growing presence of China-printed Adire in Nigeria?

Thank you for your time.

CRISIS LEADERSHIP IN NIGERIA'S INSURANCE SECTOR: NAVIGATING RECAPITALISATION AND REGULATORY REFORMS

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Abstract

The Nigerian insurance sector operates within a highly regulated environment characterised by recurring recapitalisation exercises and continuous regulatory reforms introduced by the National Insurance Commission (NAICOM). While these reforms aim to strengthen financial stability, enhance solvency, and protect policyholders, they simultaneously generate organisational uncertainty, leadership pressure, and operational disruption. Insurance firms are requiredto comply with significant capitalincreases within strict deadlines, often resulting in mergers, acquisitions, restructuring, or licence withdrawal for non-compliance. These conditions create an environment where leadership is exercised under sustained crisis conditions rather than isolated disruptive events.

Despite growing scholarly interest in crisis leadership, most studies remain grounded in Western contexts and tend to conceptualise crises as episodic rather than institutionalised. This paper addresses this gap by developing a context-specific conceptual understanding of crisis leadership in Nigeria's insurance sector. Drawing on crisis leadership theory and sensemaking theory, the paper argues that leadership effectiveness in this context depends on the interaction between regulatory pressure, leadership competencies, sensemaking processes, and follower perceptions. It further contributes to literature by reframing regulatory reform as a continuous source of institutional crisis, extending sensemaking theory into emerging economy contexts, and highlighting follower perception as central to leadership effectiveness.

The paper proposes a conceptual framework for understanding crisis leadership in regulated industries in emerging economy with a particular focus on the Nigerian insurance sector and offers implications for leadership development, policy, and future research.

Keywords: *Crisis leadership, Nigerian insurance sector, recapitalisation, regulatory reform, emerging economies.*

Introduction

Crisis leadership has become a critical area of inquiryin management and organisational studies due to increasing environmental turbulence affecting organisations globally. Contemporary organisations face crises arising from financial instability, regulatory change, geopolitical tensions, pandemics, and technological disruptions. These developments have challenged traditional leadership models that assume stability and predictability, placing greater emphasis on adaptability, decision-making under uncertainty, and stakeholder management. Global events such as the Asian Financial Crisis (1997), the Global Financial Crisis (2008), the September 11 attacks (2001), and the COVID-19 pandemic (2020) have demonstrated that crises can have profound and far-reaching consequences for organisations and economies (Pearson & Clair, 1998; Boin et al., 2005). These events highlight the importance of leadership capabilities in managing uncertainty, restoring confidence, and sustaining organisational resilience.

However, most crisis leadership literature is grounded in Western contexts where crises are conceptualised as discrete, time-bound events. This creates a theoretical limitation when applied to emerging economies where crises are often continuous, institutionally embedded, and structurally produced through governance systems. The Nigerian insurance sector represents a particularly relevant case. It is regulated by the National Insurance Commission (NAICOM) and has undergone repeated recapitalisation exercises aimed at improving solvency and financial stability. While these reforms are intended to strengthen the industry, they create significant organisational disruption by requiring firms to raise capital within strict timeframes. Non-compliance may result in mergers, acquisitions, or licence revocation.

Furthermore, the most recent regulatory reform, the Nigerian Insurance Industry Reform Act (NIIRA, 2025), significantly increased minimum capital requirements across insurance categories. Although designed to strengthen the sector, it has intensified uncertainty, leadership pressure, and organisational restructuring. Despite the importance of leadership in navigating these conditions, limited research has examined crisis leadership in the Nigerian insurance sector. Existing studies focus largely on regulation, financial performance, and risk management, with limited attention to leadership processes during regulatory disruption. This paper addresses this gap by developing a conceptual framework for crisis leadership in this context.

Literature Review Crisis Leadership

Crisis leadership refers to theability of leaders to guide organisations through disruptive events that threaten organisational stability and survival (Boin et al., 2005). It involves decision-making under pressure, communication with stakeholders, coordination of responses, and maintenance of organisational legitimacy. Pearson and Clair (1998) define organisational crises as high-impact, low-probability events that threaten viability and require urgent response. However, this definition has been criticised for assuming crises are rare and episodic. More recent researchsuggests that crisesmay be structural and recurring rather than exceptional (Williams et al., 2017). In such contexts, crisis leadership becomes an ongoing capability rather than a reactive response.

Sensemaking Theory

Sensemaking theory explains how individuals interpret ambiguous and uncertain situations by constructing meaning from available information (Weick, 1995). In crisis contexts, leaders play a central role in shaping interpretation by framing events and guiding organisational understanding. Weick (1995) argues that sensemaking is retrospective, social, and continuous. Leaders interpret eventsand influence how others understand them, therebyshaping organisational responses. In regulatory environments, sensemaking becomes essential due to ambiguity in policy interpretation and implementation uncertainty.

Leadership in Emerging Economies

Leadership in emergingeconomies is shapedby institutional volatility, weak enforcement systems, and economic instability. According to North (1990), institutional environments shape organisational behaviour by defining constraints and incentives. In African contexts, regulatory systems often create uncertainty due to inconsistent enforcement and evolving policy frameworks. This creates unique leadership challenges not fully captured in Western-centric theories. Nigeria’s insurance sector exemplifies this institutional complexity due to recurring regulatory reforms and recapitalisation cycles.

Nigerian Insurance Sector Context

The Nigerian insurance sector is governed by National Insurance Commission (NAICOM), which regulates capital adequacy, market conduct, and solvency requirements. Over thepast decades, the sector has experienced multiplerecapitalisation exercises designed to improve financial resilience. Recapitalisation requires firms to increase minimum capital within specified deadlines. Failureto comply leadsto mergers, acquisitions, or withdrawal of operating licences. While these reforms aim to strengthen the sector, they generate significant uncertainty and organisational disruption.

Therefore, Insurance companies must engage in complex strategic decisions-making involving capital mobilisation, restructuring, investor negotiations, and workforce management. These pressures are further intensified by macroeconomic instability, inflation, and limited access to capital markets. As a result, regulatory reform functions not as a one-time shock but as a recurringinstitutional condition that continuously shapes organisational behaviour and outcomes.

Crisis Leadership Challenges in the Nigerian Insurance Sector

Crisis leadership in Nigerian insurance sector is shaped by several key contextual challenges: For instance,it is mark with regulatory uncertainty , frequent policychanges and evolving capitalrequirements. This requirement comes with stricttimeline that places time pressure on leaders, causing disruptions and alternative options such as mergers, restructuring, and workforce instability and intense pressure on stakeholders .These challenges require leaders to operate in a state of continuous adaptation, making crisis leadership a sustained organisational requirement.

Methodology

This paper adopts a qualitative approach underpinned by an interpretivist orientation. The aim is not to test hypotheses empirically but to develop a context-sensitive conceptual understanding of crisis leadership within Nigerian insurance sector. Developmental papers in management and organisational studies typically focus on theory building, conceptual integration, and contextual adaptation rather than statistical generalisation or hypothesis testing. Consistent with this objective, the paper draws on a systematic and integrative review of literature on crisis leadership, sensemaking, institutional theory, and leadership in emerging economies. The review synthesises insights from established scholarly works (e.g., Boin et al., 2005; Weick, 1995; Pearson & Clair, 1998; Heifetz et al., 2009) alongside studies focusing on regulatory governance and organisational dynamics in African and emerging economy contexts.

The Nigerian insurance sector is used as a contextual anchor case, particularly the recurring recapitalisation exercises and regulatory reforms issued by the National Insurance Commission (NAICOM). Rather than treatingthis context as a data-driven case study, it is used to illustrate and ground theoretical arguments regarding institutionalised crisis conditions and leadership adaptation.

The conceptual development processfollowed a three-stage approach:

1.Literature integration: Synthesising fragmented streams of crisis leadership, sensemaking, and institutional theory to identify theoretical gaps.
2. Contextual mapping: Positioning regulatory reforms in Nigeria's insurance sector as an example of continuous institutional pressure rather than episodic crisis.
3.Theoretical abstraction: Developing a conceptual framework linking regulatory pressure, leadership competencies, follower perceptions, and organisational outcomes.

This approach is consistent with crisis leadership studies, where the emphasis is on theory extension and contextual reinterpretation rather than empirical measurement. By adopting this methodological stance, the paper responds to calls for more contextually grounded leadership research in emerging economies and contributes to addressing the over-reliance on Western-centric crisis leadership models (Harrison, et, al 2016; Harrison and Omeihe, 2023).

Conclusion

Crisis leadership in Nigerian insurance sector is shaped by recurring regulatory reforms that generate continuous institutional uncertainty. Leadership effectiveness depends on the interaction between regulatory pressure, leadership competencies, sensemaking processes, and follower perceptions.

This paper contributes to crisis leadership literature by providing a context-sensitive framework grounded in an emerging economy. It demonstrates that crisis leadership is not only reactivebut also a sustained capability required in structurally volatile regulatory environments.

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COMMUNICATION, PARTICIPATION AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN NIGERIA: WHOSE VOICE SHAPES DEVELOPMENT OUTCOMES?

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between communication, participation, and sustainable development in Nigeria, with particular emphasis on whose voices shape development outcomes. The paper argues that despite the abundance of human and natural resources in Nigeria, the country continues to face persistent developmental challenges such as poverty, unemployment, infrastructural decay, environmental degradation, inequality, and governance crises. Although successive governments have introduced numerous development plans and poverty alleviation programmes, including the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS), Vision 20:2020, the Social Investment Programme, N-Power, and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), the outcomes of these initiatives have remained largely unsatisfactory. The study contends that one of the major reasons for these failures lies not only in structural and institutional weaknesses but also in ineffective communication processes and the exclusion of citizens from development planning and implementation. Anchored on Participatory Communication Theory, the paper highlights the importance of dialogue, empowerment, inclusion, and stakeholder engagement in achieving sustainable development. It critiques the traditional top-down modernization approach to development, which often positions citizens as passive recipients of externally designed policies, and instead advocates for participatory communication that integrates indigenous knowledge, local experiences, and community involvement. The study further explores how communication functions as a strategic tool for awareness creation, social mobilization, behavioural change, and democratic participation in development processes. Using a qualitative research approach, the study proposes in-depth interviews with community members, policymakers, government officials, traditional leaders, and development practitioners to investigate how communication and participation influence development outcomes. The study concludes that sustainable development in Nigeria can only be achieved through inclusive communication systems that prioritize marginalized voices, encourage active citizen participation, and foster transparency, accountability, and collective ownership of development initiatives.

Keywords: *Communication for development, Participatory communication, Sustainable development, Marginalization, Stakeholder participation*

Introduction

Over the years, communication, participation, and sustainable development has attracted significant attention in academic discourse (Genc, 2017; Servaes, 2013; Mariani et al., 2022), and have occupied a central position in contemporary development studies, especially in developing and underdeveloped nations where there are issues of structural inequalities and governance challenges which tend to complicate the outcome of development initiatives. As articulated by the United Nations, sustainable development goes beyond just economic growth brought about by an increase in the gross domestic product (GDP) of a nation to encompass social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and participatory governance (Gupta & Vegelin, 2016; Glass & Newig, 2019; Scown et al., 2023). However, the realization of sustainable development in any nation depends greatly on the various communicative processes that helps in determining whose knowledge counts, whose interests are prioritized, and whose voices are legitimized within development frameworks. Therefore, in this regard, communication and participation are not just instrumental but constitutive of development itself (Rodl, 2025), that helps in shaping both the processes and outcomes of societal transformation.

Nigeria, often referred to as the 'giant of Africa' continues to wallow in an array of development challenges that have persisted despite the abundance of human and natural resources. Since independence in 1960, the country has been battling with several development issues such as poverty, inequality, unemployment, insecurity, infrastructural deficits, environmental degradation, and governance crises; the country's efforts towards achieving sustainable development has been fraught with challenges (Oweibia et al., 2024). While Nigeria has recorded periods of economic growth especially during oil booms in the 1970s, these gains have not translated into any significant improvements in the standard of living of majority of the citizens (Mondesir, & Junior, 2024). In fact, Ezeogidi (2020) referred to this period as the wasted years of oil boom in Nigeria because of the inability of the nation to build sustainable wealth and improve the living conditions of the citizens. Khanna (2017) noted that the abundance of oil abundance often times, have negative consequences on the economy of the nation due to the inability of the government to effectively manage the revenue. Till date, the country is still suffering from the consequences of its actions as majority of its citizens still lack access to basic services such as quality healthcare, education, clean water, and reliable electricity.

At the heart of these challenges lies not only the issue of resource allocation but also the question of communication and participation—how development is conceptualized, articulated, and implemented. Nigeria has had several development plans, economic reforms, poverty alleviation programs, and other development policies aimed at improving the living conditions of the citizens (Chukwu, 2020; Abasilim et al., 2025) but these development plans are largely driven by government institutions, international agencies, and policy elites, with little or no input from the communities who are mostly affected by such policies. Most often, this approach has resulted in the design of poor and unsustainable development interventions and policies that fail to reflect the realities, needs, and priorities of the citizens. Therefore, it is imperative to recognize that sustainable development cannot take place in isolation from the people it intended to serve; rather, it requires inclusive communication that facilitates dialogue, participation and understanding among stakeholders and other policymakers.

To achieve sustainable development, communication and participation both plays a vital role. However, the kind of communication discussed here goes beyond the exchange of information or ideas, but it is a communication for development. Fraser and Restrepo-Estrada (1998) cited in Lennie and Tacchi (2013) noted that communication for development involves the utilization of various communication processes, techniques and media to help people in order for them to be fully aware of their situations and the options available to them to change these situations for good, mobilizing them into taking actions that can cause positive change and sustainable development, and help them in the acquisition of set skills and knowledge needed to improve their living conditions and also improve the effectiveness of public institutions. Chile (2025) also noted that "communication is a fundamental pillar of societal development and stability, serving as a crucial mechanism through which individuals, institutions, and governments exchange ideas, share knowledge, and foster collective action" (p.565). In this present technological-driven society, communication plays an important role in shaping the progress of the society, influences public discourse, enhances good governance, and facilitates both socio-political and economic transformation.

Studies (Mefalopulos, 2005; Nielsen & Thomsen, 2011; Bellantuono et al., 2022) have established that there is a symbiotic relationship between communication and sustainable development. As modern societies continue to evolve, there is a growing demand for strategic communication in ensuring the progress, stability, and development of the society. Therefore, communication becomes an imperative strategic tool needed for social mobilization, attitudinal change, and inclusive participation; all of which are necessary for sustainable development. Therefore, it should be noted that sustainable development cannot be achieved without effective communication and inclusive participation of different stakeholders in the society because communication serves as the channel for the dissemination of development initiatives and policies while participation ensures those who will benefit from development initiatives are actively involved in these decisions that will improve their standard of living. In this regard, participatory communication therefore, challenges the traditional modernization paradigm, which often position members of the societies as passive recipient of development initiatives and policies that are externally designed. Obiakor et al (2025) noted that the idea behind participatory communication is that members of the society who are the beneficiaries of development programs and initiatives are included in the "planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation phases enhances relevance, legitimacy, and ownership of development interventions" (p.65).

What participatory communication does is that it empowers citizens to be fully involved in the formulation and implementation of development initiatives and policies, not acting as mere spectators.Empowerment is the core of all development, and communication is the key to empowerment (Cahyono, 2018). Therefore, effective communication engenders empowerment, which therefore, leads to the active participation of citizens in development initiatives. Agena (2024) posit that development programs and initiatives should stem out from the capacity of the citizens to actively participate in the task of transforming the society and improving their own standard of living. Participation also gives the citizens the "ability to face their problems with resources or ideas emanating from within without relying of external help themselves" (p.184).

In order to address the developmental challenges in Nigeria, successive administrations in Nigeria have adopted various development plans which they considered appropriate. According to Chukwu (2020), since independence in 1960, Nigeria has embarked on various development plans, programs and initiatives in order to improve the economy and improve the living conditions of the citizens. There have been four development plans in the post-independence history of Nigeria: First National Development Plan (1962), the Second National Development Plan (1970-74), Third National Development Plan (1975-80), and Fourth National Development Plan (1981-85). Although, it would have been five national development plans, but the fifth did not materialize because of economic, political and structural challenges (Adeniji et al., 2016). The fifth national development plan was disrupted as a result of the introduction of the Structural and Adjustment Program (SAP) under the Ibrahim Babangida led military regime. Ogola (2025) noted that with the introduction of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP), economic priorities were shifted to only economic reforms such as devaluation of currency, liberalization of trades, and the reduction in government expenditure; and this conflicted with the objectives of the proposed fifth national development plans, thereby making some of its projections very unrealistic.

Apart from these aforementioned national plans, the federal government also introduced a three year rolling development plans from 1990-1993 all in a search for appropriate development strategies. Between 2003 and 2007, the federal government introduced the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS) with its focus on wealth creation, employment generation and poverty reduction. Other development plans that have been introduced in Nigeria include the Seven Point Agenda (2007-2010), Vision 20:2020 launched in 2009 with the objective of making Nigeria one of the top global economies by 2020; Transformation Agenda (2011-2015) with the objective of accelerating growth and job creation; Economic Recovery and Growth Plan (2017-2020), National Development Plan (2021-2025).

Nigeria's problems are not always with the formulation of development plans and programs, but its problems lie in the implementation of these programs. Despite the fact that there have been a lot of development plans, these plans have not been able to achieve the desired outcomes; and "this is evident from widespread poverty, dilapidated infrastructural facilities, massive unemployment, low capacity utilization, technological backwardness, short-life expectancy, urban congestion, excessive debt burden, environmental degradation and high incidence of diseases which beset the country" (Ejikeme, 2023, p.79). This therefore, suggests a disconnect between the formulation of development policies and actual outcomes.

Some studies (Eneh, 2011; Akanle & Shittu, 2022; Wakwe et al., 2025) have attributed the failure of these development programs to structural, economic, and political constraints such as poor funding, policy inconsistency, corruption, and weak institutional capacity. Although these aforementioned factors are significant, they do not sufficiently explain the reason development programs fail to produce tangible benefits the society.

An important but often overlooked aspect of this failure is in the communication processes and participatory mechanisms which underpins these development efforts. Aliyu and Yusuf (2021) noted that development plans in Nigeria has always followed an historical trajectory whereby development policies are initiated and implemented without the involvement of the citizens. This lack of inclusive communication and genuine stakeholder participation usually undermines the relevance and sustainability of development policies. Consequently, many development programs fail at the implementation stage because they do not adequately reflect the priorities of the people.

Based on the above, this study therefore, addresses the extent to which communication and participation influence development outcomes in Nigeria, and whose voices are prioritized or marginalized in the development process. In addressing this issue, the following research questions were raised;

RQ 1: To what extent do communication processes influence the implementation and outcomes of development programmes in Nigeria?

RQ 2: How does stakeholder participation affect the sustainability of development initiatives in Nigeria?

RQ 3: Whose voices are represented or marginalised in the planning and implementation of development programmes, and how does this affect development outcomes.

Literature Review

Conceptualizing Communication and Sustainable Development

The relationship between communication and sustainable development has evolved significantly especially in development communication literature, marking a significant shift of viewing communication as merely the dissemination of information to a more broader, participatory, and transformative process. Although various scholars (Wolfe, 2006; Goorha, 2010; Kunst, 2014; Inyang, 2020) have established that early development paradigms, most especially the modernization theory, positioned communication as a top-down mechanism used for transmitting knowledge, information, and other behavioural change communication messages from development experts and policymakers to passive audience. In this framework, communication was largely synonymous with mass media campaigns which are designed to promote economic growth and social change. However, critics of the modernization theory (Roxborough, 1988; Munck, 2018, Mohammed & Ibrahim, 2023) highlighted the limitation of the theory noting that the theory failed to account for local context and indigenous knowledge systems. Consequently, contemporary scholarship (Servaes & Lie, 2015; Guilherme, 2021; Foderaro & Gunnarsson-Lorentzen, 2024) reconceptualizes communication as a dialogic and inclusive process that is vital in the achievement of sustainable development outcomes.

In conceptualizing communication and sustainable development, it is important to first of all understand the concept of development communication. The term development communication was coined by Nora C. Quebral in 1971 (Manyozo, 2006). Quebral cited in Servaes (2020) defined development communication as "the art and science of human communication applied to the speedy transformation of a country and the mass of its people from poverty to a dynamic state of economic growth that makes possible greater social equality and the larger fulfillment of the human potential" (p.4).

In explaining development communication, one may be forced to ask: what exactly is development, and what are the constituents of development? It should be noted here that there is no universal definition for development. In fact, over the years, the concept of development has become a victim of definitional pluralism, and it has become one of the most contested concepts because of its different interpretations. This probably made Rodney (1972) to note that "development in human society is a many-sided process" (p.3) involving individual, social, and economic levels. On the other hand, Rogers (1976) cited in Melkote and Steeves (2015) defined development as "a widely participatory process of social change in a society, intended to bring about both social and material advancement (including greater equality, freedom, and other valued qualities) for the majority of the people through their gaining greater control over their environment" (p.371).

Often times, a lot of scholars define development only from the economic perspective. For instance, Gopinath (2008) measured development only in monetary terms arguing that if a nation is able to increase the per capital standard of living of its citizens, such a nation should be considered developed. Gopinath's view is no different from Adah and Abasilim (2015) who noted that "development can also be viewed as the capacity of a nation to increase its static economy to a level where it can generate and sustain an annual increase in its Gross National Product (GNP)" (p.276). Although some scholars (Soubbotina, 2004; Hess, 2016; Aguilar-Rivera, 2021; Conable & Olsson, 2024) noted that development should be viewed beyond the lens of increase in the gross domestic product of a nation or economic growth but should include a significant improvement in the living conditions of citizens.

Seers (1969) cited in Impalure and Dore (2020) noted that if any nation wants to know if they are developing or not, such a nation must be able to answer three very important questions: What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? Seers believed that if the answers provided to these questions imply that poverty, unemployment, and inequality are declining, then such a nation can be said to be experiencing development.

Based on all of these, I will then summarize the definition of development thus:
Development is a multidimensional process of significant improvement in the socio-economic and political conditions of the society which lead to enhanced standard of living, reduction in unemployment, poverty, inequality, and the transformation of institutions to support inclusive and sustainable progress.

Having defined aspects of development, it is important to defined sustainable development. As defined in the 1987 Brundtland Commission Report, sustainable development is the development that meets present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This definition shows the relationship of economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development. Therefore, communication plays an important role in mediating these dimensions by facilitating awareness, fostering participation, enabling knowledge exchange, and promoting behavioural change. Scholars have argued that for sustainable development to be achieved, effective communication is necessary because one need communication to actively engage stakeholders, build consensus, and also support collective action (Obregón & Tufte, 2017; Jones et al, 2017; Ferraro & Beunza, 2018; Samašonok & Išoraitė, 2023). Based on this, communication is an important constituent of sustainable development.

Servaes and Lie (2015) noted that "communication for sustainable development and social change is therefore never neutral. It takes the side of human development with respect for each other and for the environment we live in. In taking such a normative stand, it becomes clear that some concepts, especially some normative political concepts, are valued more than others" (p. 127). Chile (2025) specifically noted that one of the driving forces behind the socio-economic development of Nigeria in this present dispensation is communication, as it is an effective mechanism in disseminating development information, engage members of the public, and promote social change. Through the effective utilization of various mass media channels and digital media, communication is used to mobilize members of the society in order for them to embrace programs and initiatives that promote economic development and their overall wellbeing.

One of the major reasons why development policies fail in Nigeria is due to ineffective communication between government agencies, policymakers, development partners and members of the society. A study by Eja and Ramegowda (2019) revealed that poor communication among stakeholders is the leading cause of delays, abandonment, and eventual failure of development programs in Nigeria. So, when these communication gaps exist, development policies will be poorly understood, and this will lead to duplication of efforts, misallocation of resources, and lack of accountability.

Theoretical Perspectives on Communication and Participation
This study is anchored on the Participatory Communication Theory. The theory emerged as a normative theory in the field of communication especially in development communication studies, and it emphasized the active involvement of citizens in the communication process that affects their standard of living. The theory was developed as a critique to the modernization theory especially in the area of technology transfer and the diffusion of knowledge (Anaeto et al., 2008). Mishra (2017) in agreement with Anaeto et al (2008) noted that participatory communication theory was developed due to the inability of the modernization theory to meet the needs of least developed countries (LDC).
A lot of scholars have been associated with the formulation and further development of the participatory communication theory, it is widely accepted that Paulo Freire laid the foundation for the formulation of the theory in 1970 in his work Pedagogy of the Oppressed where he introduced important concepts such as dialogue, consientization, and liberation which later became very important elements in participatory communication. Though, Obiakor et al (2025) argued that the model introduced by Freire's in his work was not really perceived to be a theory in communication studies, "but his emphasis on two-way dialogue and active community involvement inspired subsequent scholars and practitioners who shaped the field of participatory communication into a coherent theoretical and practical framework" (p.67).

Thus, while Freire is seen as the proponent of participatory communication, scholars such as Jan Servaes, Thomas Tufte, and Alfonso Gumucio-Dagron, also made significant contribution to participatory communication by helping to reshape and refine the theory. For instance, Servaes (1999) in his contribution to participatory communication advanced the concept of multiplicity paradigm, which challenged universal, top-down development models and advocates for people-centred communication approaches. He noted that horizontal communication and the integration of endogenous knowledge systems important to sustainable development. On the other hand, Tufte (2017) in his work on communication for social change highlighted the influence of dialogue, citizen engagement, and empowerment in promoting sustainable development. He linked participatory communication to media literacy and youth engagement especially in regards to social change and civic participation. Gumucio-Dagron (2001) is popular for providing a much clearer insight on participatory communication practices through the use of community media and grassroots initiatives especially in the Global South.

There are some basic assumptions of the participatory communication theory. First, the theory assumes that individuals are not passive recipients of information but active agents who have the capacity to contribute to their development, and by extension, the development of the society (Huesca, 2008; Tufte & Mefalopulos, 2009). Another assumption of the theory is that local knowledge is valuable and should be integrated into development processes (Cornish & Dunn, 2009). Rather than depending on external knowledge and expertise, participatory communication encourages the incorporation of indigenous knowledge systems and lived experiences of the people. Also, the theory emphasized that communication should be dialogical and horizontal rather than hierarchical (Gumucio-Dagron, 2008).

There are several concepts embedded in participatory communication theory, and one of them is dialogue (Kincaid & Figueroa, 2009). In participatory communication, dialogue does not just mean conversation; it is a process of mutual exchange of ideas built on respect, trust, and openness. Through dialogue, citizens will be able to engage in meaningful conversations, debate stakeholders and policymakers, and proffer solutions to their numerous development challenges. Another important concept embedded in theory is empowerment (Srampickal, 2006) because participatory communication seeks to empower marginalized groups in the society by giving them a voice in decision-making processes. Empowerment does not only involve giving citizens access to information but also the ability for citizens to be able to interpret, question, and act upon that information they have received. It should be noted here that participation itself is a multi-dimensional concept within the theory. It can range from passive participation, where citizens are merely informed about decisions, to active participation, where they are fully involved in decision-making process and implementation of development initiatives. Johansen and Upham (2026) noted that scholars like Sherry Arnstein conceptualized this in the "ladder of participation," which explains the different levels of citizens' participation, from manipulation and tokenism to partnership and citizen control. Therefore, participatory communication theory advocates for citizens should have higher levels of participation that will enable them have a voice in the formulation, implementation, and outcomes of development policies and initiatives.

Communication Processes in Development Programs in Nigeria

Development programs in Nigeria ranging from public health interventions to agricultural reforms and poverty alleviation policies, are often time dependent on effective communication processes. It has been established in this study that communication is not just a tool for disseminating information; but it is central to shaping participation, influencing behavioural change, building trust, and ensuring sustainability. In a country like Nigeria characterized by linguistic diversity, socio-cultural plurality, and uneven access to media infrastructure, communication for developmental purposes must operate through a multi-layered system that integrates mass media, interpersonal channels, and indigenous communication systems.

In the last decade, Nigeria has implemented various development programs aimed at addressing key socio-economic challenges of the nation. Prominent among these development programs is the Social Investment Program which was introduced in 2016 by the Muhammadu Buhari led administration aimed at reducing poverty and unemployment in the country. Obute (2021) noted that as part of the Social Investment Program, there were monthly conditional cash transfers up to the tune of 5,000 naira to selected households who were considered poorest of the poor.

Although Obute argued that the conditional cash transfer was helpful because it provided a form of financial relief to the beneficiaries; however, the program was not a suitable poverty alleviation program for any nation that is interested in improving the living conditions of its citizens. Although, there are other programs embedded in the Social Investment Program such as N-Power for unemployed graduates; Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP) aimed at small and micro businesses to offer interest-free credit to micro businesses operating at the bottom of the Nigerian economic pyramid (Obute, 2021; Ahmed, 2024; Abdulraman et al, 2025). The program capaitalized on three distinct kinds of loans (MarketMoni, TraderMoni and FarmerMoni) to support small and medium scale businesses in Nigeria. Despite the intended objective of these development programs, their success sometimes depend on how policymakers are able to effectively communicate these programs to the target populations, especially in rural and underserved areas.

The media including radio, television, newspapers, and digital platforms serve as the primary communication channels for the dissemination of development messages in Nigeria. Among these various mass media channels, Ajisafe and Dada (2016) notes that radio remains the most accessible and influential medium, especially in rural communities with low level of literacy and inconsistent electricity supply. Different development initiatives in Nigeria especially those directed towards rural residents tend to use radio jingles, talk shows and public service announcements as a means of creating awareness and informing them about the different development initiatives that are offered by the government. As an illustration, the radio campaigns in local languages, in the case of Polio Eradication Initiative, played a significant role in combating vaccine hesitancy in northern Nigeria (Adoghe, 2011; Dagaci et al, 2025). In the same manner, the N-Power Program has been conducted through campaigns in television and social media to educate Nigerian youths about the registration process and benefits.

Other Sub-headings to the Included in the Literature Review are:

1. Stakeholder Participation and Sustainability of Development Initiatives in Nigeria
2. Power, Voice, and Representation in Development Communication
3. Marginalisation and Inclusion in the Nigerian Development

Methodology

The qualitative research method will be adopted for the study in order to examine how communication and participation can shape the outcomes of sustainable development initiatives in Nigeria, paying close attention know those whose voices are being marginalized or amplified in the development process. The qualitative research method is appropriate for this study because it will enable in-depth exploration of meanings, lived experiences, and power relations embedded in communication practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The study will focus on selected development programmes in Nigeria such as the Social Investment Program, N-Power and the Government Enterprise and Empowerment Programme (GEEP), and a purposive sampling technique will be adopted in this study to select participants who are directly involved in or affected by the development programmes. Some of the participants for this study will include community members (this will include marginalized individuals such as women and people living with disabiltiies), local leaders and traditional authorities, government officials, non-governmental organization (NGO) representatives, policymakers, and development advocates. This kind of sampling technique is suitable for this research because it gives the researcher the opportunity to select participants that are knowledgeable on the subject of discourse and can provide deep insights into the research problem (Patton, 2014).

The data for this study will be collected using in-depth interviews in order to explore the participants' experiences, perceptions, and roles in communication and decision-making processes. This method will give room for flexibility and depth in understanding the various perspectives of participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Data will be analyzed using thematic analysis, which will identifying, analyzing, and interpreting themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

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THE USE OF GENERATIVE ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE FOR SELF-DIAGNOSIS ON HEALTH, AND ITS IMPACTS ON USERS IN SCOTLAND

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Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

According to Reddy (2024) and Waseem et al. (2026), the use of artificial intelligence (AI), particularly generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) is significantly transforming various fields of endeavour, and the healthcare sector is among the most impacted. Emerging evidence shows that repeated use of GenAI, which was at first motivated by curiosity, anxiety and dependency, is increasingly progressing towards reliance and dependency, thereby contributing to the normalisation of use of GenAI systems for health diagnosis. This phenomenon is known as Cyberchondria. (El-Osta et al.,2026; White and Horvitz, 2009). Maphosa (2024) urges that this normalisation of use of GenAI systems is creating increasing concerns such as, ethical, legal, and social that are further escalated by the misuse of AI and constantly evolution of the field of GenAI. Further concerns are about grey areas that new challenges can bring, where unforeseen risks are not prepared for. It is worthy of note that emerging systems driven by large language models (LLM), compute-intensive infrastructure, expansive datasets, multimodal extensions, deep-learning architectures, and new learning paradigms are providing services which are impacting healthcare service delivery globally. With this, "the capabilities of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) have accelerated over the past years, and they are beginning to impact healthcare in a significant way (Howell, 2024).

Historically, AI while evolving, has moved from rule-based generative systems from the 50s and 70s, to model-based generative algorithm in the 80s and 2000, to deep generative methodologies between 2000 to 2020s, and to foundation models from 2020s till date. This shows the length of years GenAI has used to build depth and capacity for global impact. (He et al., 2025).

As a continent, the European commission (EC) hopes that through its' AI ecosystem, Europe would hold the highest adoption rate for Gen AI. According to the EC, the commission is pushing for European dominance in the use of GenAI through its proposed "made in Europe" AI ecosystem and deploying over one hundred and thirty-one Billion Euros towards this ambition (Nepelski and Sobolewski, 2020). The Commission hopes that through the delivery of initiatives like the European Digital Innovation Hubs, AI Factories, the AI Skills Academy, it would foster innovation and drive Europe's leadership in AI. Also, the commission hopes to achieve dominance through the delivery of further initiatives like European Digital Innovation Hubs, AI Factories, and the AI Skills Academy; all these are to be done to foster innovation and drive Europe's leadership in AI (Samoili et al., 2020). However, most of its companies are stuck at experimental phase between 2024 and 2026, because the changes are too rapid globally. Also, due to data privacy (GDPR) concerns, there is a high demand for "Sovereign AI" model that would comply with data privacy management requirements, and so many environments striving for dominance are pushing the stakes of this sovereignty (European Commission, 2024). According to the Samoili et al., (2020), the three countries with the largest number of AI-related players are the United Kingdom, Germany and France.

Studies have shown that 2,618,862 adults in the United Kingdom consulted and reported the symptoms on the internet when experiencing symptoms during the COVID-19 era, this came with significant shift to AI-enhanced platforms between 2022 and 2024, following the introduction of generative models (Aboueid et al., 2021; Menni et al., 2020).

Within Scotland, the challenges are more pronounced by limited research on user behaviour and the impact of engagement with generative artificial intelligence for self-diagnosis. Recent studies shows that while AI offers opportunities for improved access to information and self-management, significant gaps remain in usability, trust, and contextual adaptation. (Müller et al., 2024, Sauchelli et al., 2023, Jacob et al., 2023, Scottish Government, 2021). Hence, the absence of good understanding of the impacts would increase implications from the risk of misuse, over reliance, and adverse outcomes. This study hopes to address these gaps by examining the impact of generative AI on users in Scotland and propose a framework using a user diagnostic template (UDT) to promote responsible, safe and accountable use of gen AI tools and platforms in an everchanging environment.

1.2 Problem Statement

Although GenAI tools and Platforms are widely in used for health concerns, there is still no known structured guide for its safe and ethical usage for self-diagnosis. (Reddy, 2024, Jacob et al., 2023). Existing literatures have extensively addressed the use, the empowerment, the bridge in access to healthcare, and the reliability of users on self-diagnostic tools and platforms (Müller et al., 2024, Abd-alrazaq et al., 2022). However, none has addressed the impacts they are having on them. Researchers have tailored their work to selected areas, most of which are in mental health and neurodivergence, diagnostic accuracy, patient to healthcare practitioner relationship, and anxiety (Wang et Al., 2025, Hua et al., 2025, Blease et al., 2023), while other areas of adoption, have minimal attention, particularly in the context of Scotland (Sauchelli et al., 2023). It is worthy of note that, as a follow-on to the government's 10-year health plan, that health institutes in the bid to support the NHS and health care users, are seeking new ways to create access to health, using the national healthtech access programme. While this will offer potential benefits such as accessibility, cost effectiveness and speed, it still raises concerns about ethical use and behavioural impacts. Moreso, this is only to be carried out in England, as these specific health-tech implementations often applies to England alone, but the strategy and regulatory framework, will be used all over the United Kingdom. This leaves Scotland to its own distinct digital health landscape, which show little empirical evidence on demographic patterns, the behavioural tendencies and the social-economic implication of using GenAI for self-diagnosis.

1.3 Aim and objectives

1.3.1 Aim

This study investigates the use, impact, and implications of generative Artificial Intelligence for self-diagnosis for health in Scotland to improve accuracy, safety, and responsible use.

1.3.2 Research objectives

* To Investigate users of GenAI profile for self-diagnosis in Scotland.
* To evaluate the impacts in terms of psychological, behavioural, financial, and social factors of GenAI-based self-diagnosis on users.
* To explore the implications of the use of GenAI for self-diagnosis.
* To design a User Diagnostic Template (UDT) for safer guided AI self-diagnosis.
* To propose policy, structure for governance, and safety recommendations for responsible use of generative AI self-diagnosis tools.

1.4 Research questions

RQ1: What demography and behavioural characteristics describe users of GenAI's systems for self-diagnosis in Scotland?

RQ2: What psychological, behavioural, social and financial impacts as associated with the use of GenAI-based self-diagnosis on users in Scotland?

RQ3: What are the implications of the use of GenAI for self-diagnosis?

RQ4: How can a safer guided framework for GenAI self-diagnosis be developed?

RQ5: What policy, structure for governance, and safety recommendations would aid responsible use of generative AI self-diagnosis tools?

1.5 Significance of the research

This study investigates the impact of using generative artificial intelligence tools for self-diagnosis by examining the use, motivations, financial implications, psychological effects, and social consequences for users. It also investigates demographic patterns, and ethical considerations of using GenAI tools for self-diagnosis in the Scotland. It hopes to contribute to the accomplishment of one of the current most prioritized sustainable developmental goals (SDGs) for Scotland, the SDG 3 (Good Health and Wellbeing): which is priority for delivery of good healthcare for all ages. As such, this research aims to design and propose a User Diagnostic Template (UDT), which is a structured digital disc and decision-support tool aimed at reducing the risks of misdiagnoses and guide users toward responsible self-assessments for excellent quality life. This study makes three original contributions, which are; to bridge existing knowledge gaps, shape patient' involvement initiatives, and improve the quality of future health services, thereby fostering the adaptability of health management tools and platforms in the gen AI-driven era. Lastly it will provide a user-supported template as there is none currently available.

1.6 Contribution of the study

This study will contribute to knowledge, policy, and general health care practice, while addressing the emerging but underexplored area of the use gen AI for self-diagnosis for health concerns, and its' multi-dimensional impact on users in Scotland. Although existing studies have examined the accuracy and technical capabilities of gen AI enabled diagnostic systems, there is little empirical research that investigates how users interact with these systems in Scotland.

This study contributes empirical evidence on user engagement with gen AI, by exploring demographic patterns, motivations, behavioural tendencies and psychological outcomes, which provides context-based insights that by implication escalates impacts to a tipping point that calls for national concerns and by extension global concerns.

So also, the study will contribute to theoretical advancement by extending the understanding of user digital health behaviour, through showing the links between user motivation and self-diagnosis behaviour, user trust of gen AI systems, cyberchondria, digital dependency, and responsible use of gen AI; this will enable a deeper understanding of how repeated use of gen AI shape health care seeking behaviours and patients' decision making.

This study will also methodological contribution to research through the development of the user diagnostic template (UDT). The UDT will serve as a practical decision support mechanism that guide safer and more informed use of gen AI system for self-diagnosis. It will serve as transferable framework for future research and adaptation in other healthcare contexts.

Furthermore, the study will contribute to policy and governance regulation though the generation of evidence-based recommendations for health care regulators, policymakers, technology developers and health care providers. These recommendations of findings will support the development of ethical frameworks, standards and safety regulation for responsible use of gen AI.

Lastly, the study will contribute to professional and societal practices, improving digital literacy, reducing misinformation risk, reducing misdiagnosis, curbing over reliance on unfounded information and systems, contribute towards sustainable health innovation and align Scotland to UK sustainable developmental goals (SDG 3), which is good health and wellbeing.

Overall, it is a user-perspective driven contribution to bridge the gap between advancement in technology, user experience and responsible healthcare governance in the era of gen AI.

1.7 Practical application of the study

Drawing from the outcomes of this study, the practical application lies in the study's potential to support safe and ethical use of gen AI for self-diagnosis within healthcare and public health systems, particularly in Scotland.
The study will provide recommendations based on findings, first in Scotland, to policymakers and regulators, on how self-diagnosis systems can be safely and responsibly governed. It will inform future policy in the areas of accountability, patient safety, ethical boundaries, and digital health regulation.
Also, this study will provide information to help healthcare professionals and organisations to understand how GenAI systems users, use these systems before seeking professional care in Scotland. This understanding can support shared decision making, help identify risks of misinformation, improve patient clinical practice, improve communication, reduce digital dependencies, or anxiety-related overuse.
Additionally, this study will help Gen AI designers and technology developers to identify user expectations, behaviours, psychology and prevalent risks associated with self-diagnostic systems in Scotland. It will further guide the design of safer, transparent, ethically aligned user-centred UDT, which will be with improved transparency, risk warnings, referral prompts and responsible decision-support mechanisms.
Moreso, the UDT designed in this study offers practical output, as it can be opted as decision support framework by individuals using gen AI for health-related concerns; which are to evaluate symptoms correctly, recognise risk boundaries appropriately, and seek appropriate professional care. It can also be embedded into digital health platforms as an embedded safety and triage support tool.
Furthermore, the study will contribute to public health education and digital health awareness, by improving awareness for both the benefits and risks of gen AI-assisted sled-diagnosis. As this will help users to make informed health care decisions, reduce misuse, and encourage responsible digital behaviour in increasingly gen AI driven healthcare environments.
Lastly, the findings of the study may be transferable beyond Scotland. This makes the research valuable not only locally but also globally as healthcare systems generally adapt to the expanding role of gen AI.

1.8 Key concepts and definitions

AI -Artificial intelligence: AI is "a machine-based system that can, for a given set of human-defined objectives, make predictions, recommendations or decisions influencing real or virtual environments". (National Artificial Intelligence Initiative Act of 2020)

GenAI -Generative artificial Intelligence: An artificial intelligence (AI) technique that generates synthetic artifacts by analysing training examples; learning their patterns and distribution; and then creating realistic facsimiles. It uses generative modelling and advances in deep learning to produce diverse content at scale by utilizing existing media such as text, graphics, audio, and video. (Leslie and Rossi, 2023)

Self-diagnosis: Is the process of identifying a medical condition in oneself.
(Aboueid et al, 2019)

Triage: Is from the French verb "trier" meaning "to sort". It is fundamentally used to prioritize care and allocate scare resource to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number.
(Aacharya, et al., 2011)

UDT -User diagnostic template (Digital disc): A structured user-centred framework used to investigate, understand identify the root cause of a specific health concern, situation, issue, or behaviour; to administer an informed and appropriate care decision. (Charlse, 2016)

Cyberchondria: Refers to the unfounded escalation of concerns about common symptomatology, based on the review of search results and literature on the Web. (White and Horvitz)

1.9 Limitation of the study

While this study aims to provide insights into the of gen AI for self-diagnosis and its impacts on users in Scotland, the following limitations are acknowledged.

First, is the limitation due to scope, in which the study is geographically limited to Scotland, findings may reflect some healthcare system characteristics unique to Scotland, which are inform of digital health infrastructure, and socio-cultural. While this gives contextual depth, it may limit the generalisability of the findings to other parts of the United Kingdom or international healthcare settings where access, regulation and AI use differs.

Second, the study is user-focused on its approaches, as such it does not examine all forms of gen AI used in healthcare, therefore clinicals-focused diagnostic algorithms, robotic systems, or administrative tools are not considered. As a result, conclusions will be limited to user-focused Gen AI systems, such as symptoms checkers, conversational AI assistants and related self-diagnostic systems.

Third, the study may show bias as it would rely primarily on self-reported user experiences and perceptions. Participant may underreport unsafe practices, or may over-state benefits and satisfaction, which will potentially affect the accuracy of behavioural findings.

Fourth, the rapidly evolving nature of GenAI technologies present temporal limitations, therefore findings may only present current patterns and not future realities. This also means that some technological developments or policy changes that occur after data collection may not be captured in the findings.

Lastly, although the proposed UDT is intended as a practical framework for safer gen AI assisted self-diagnosis, may only remain at its design phase and may not be fully developed or validated due to the limited research scope and time.

Despite these limitations, this study remains important because it addresses a timely and under-researched issue. It also provides foundational evidence to support future research, policy development, and responsible innovation in gen AI enabled healthcare.

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AFFORDABILITY ON WHOSE TERMS? REPOSITIONING SUBSIDY POLICY, CREDIT ACCESS AND URBAN HOUSING INEQUALITY IN GHANA

Sandra Otaabea Sefa and Dr Olalekan Adisa

Abstract

Ghana has addressed housing affordability through state estates, mortgage institutions, public private partnerships and subsidised credit. Yet formal housing finance remains shallow, while a large share of housing is produced incrementally by households who build over time with savings, family support, remittances and informal savings arrangements. This paper asks why programmes described as affordable so often reach a narrow group of households. It argues that the problem is not only limited supply or limited credit. It is also a problem of policy recognition. Eligibility rules, accepted forms of income, tenure requirements and methods of disbursement are shaped around a buyer who can purchase a completed home through regular formal credit. That model is understandable from the perspective of lenders and public administrators, but it is poorly aligned with the way much urban housing is actually assembled.

The paper makes one contribution. It reframes affordability as a question of institutional terms rather than price thresholds alone. Affordability concerns not only what a house costs, but also when payments are due, what evidence counts as income, what form of land claim is accepted, and who carries the risk when income is interrupted. The argument is developed through documentary policy analysis of Ghanaian housing policy, budget statements, official housing finance material, housing market reports and scholarship. The Saglemi Affordable Housing Project is used as an illustrative case because its public record makes the assumptions of a finished unit and mortgage model unusually visible. The paper does not treat incremental self-building as an alternative to public responsibility. It argues instead that housing policy must move beyond supporting completed units alone and support the incremental systems through which much urban housing is produced.

Keywords: *housing affordability; subsidy policy; informal finance; recognition; urban inequality; Ghana*

Ghanaian governments have treated affordable housing as a continuing public priority since independence. The instruments have changed over time. State estates were followed by a greater emphasis on private supply, public-private partnerships and mortgage finance. The policy objective has remained familiar: to enable households to acquire completed dwellings through a combination of state support, private construction and credit. This objective responds to a real and difficult problem. Ghana faces a persistent housing shortage, rising construction costs and weak access to long-term housing finance. The question is not whether more supply and better finance are needed. They are. The question is why the main instruments used to address affordability continue to be built around a route to housing that relatively few households can use.

The scale of this mismatch is clear in housing finance data. The Centre for Affordable Housing Finance in Africa reports that outstanding mortgage debt amounted to 0.78 per cent of gross domestic product in 2024. The same source estimates that about 90 per cent of housing supply is delivered incrementally by individual households and the contractors they engage, with construction often taking between five and fifteen years (CAHF, 2024). Formal mortgage lending and incremental self-building therefore occupy very different places in Ghana's housing system. The first is small but central to policy language. The second is widespread but less visible in the design of subsidies and official measures of success.

This paper asks: affordability on whose terms? It approaches affordability not only as a relationship between price and income, but also as a set of institutional conditions. These conditions include the timing of payments, the proof of income required, the kind of tenure documentation accepted, the form of housing that can be financed and the consequences of payment interruption. They are not simply technical details. They determine who can enter a scheme, who can borrow and which housing practices are treated as legitimate objects of public support.

The paper's contribution to development studies is to frame this issue as one of recognition. It argues that policies recognise some economic and tenure arrangements as evidence of capacity while treating others as too informal, uncertain or difficult to administer. This does not mean that formal finance is unnecessary or that incremental building is without risk. It means that a policy system designed around completed units and conventional mortgages will tend to support households whose income, savings and land rights already fit those instruments. The Saglemi Affordable Housing Project is used to examine this issue. Saglemi is not presented as an exceptional explanation for all housing policy. It is illustrative because it brings together, in one highly documented project, the assumptions of large-scale construction, formal mortgage access and completed unit delivery. Similar assumptions are visible in the mortgage subsidy agenda announced in the 2018 Budget Statement and in the mortgage-based model of the National Homeownership Fund.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Formal housing finance and the architecture of eligibility

Research on Ghana's housing finance system has long identified high interest rates, limited long-term local currency funding, high deposits, house prices that exceed most incomes and weak land documentation as major barriers to mortgage access (Teye, Teye and Asiedu, 2015; Ehwi and Asante, 2016). Ghana's mortgage market is therefore not merely small in volume. It is selective in social terms. Conventional underwriting is built around evidence that lenders can verify: regular recorded income, a stable repayment history, a deposit and collateral that can be legally enforced. These requirements have an obvious rationale. Mortgage lenders must manage default risk, and public schemes must protect scarce resources. Yet the combined effect is to favour households whose work, savings and tenure have already passed through formal institutions.

Government policy documents reflect this orientation. The 2018 Budget Statement described the development of a mortgage and housing finance market as central to social equity and economic development. It proposed subsidised local currency mortgages through partnerships with banks, pension trustees and securities market actors, beginning with public sector workers (Ministry of Finance, 2018, para. 837). The language is important. It does not simply offer financial support. It defines a route to affordability through formal employment, bank-based credit and home purchase.

The National Homeownership Fund has followed the same broad architecture by promoting local currency mortgage products through partner banks for public and private sector workers (National Homeownership Fund, n.d.). These initiatives may improve access for some households, but their starting point is the mortgage-eligible buyer rather than the household building gradually from uneven resources.

2.2 Incremental construction and informal finance

A second body of work describes a different housing economy. Turner (1976) argued that households should not be understood only as passive recipients of finished housing. In many cities, households acquire land and build in stages as resources become available. Ghanaian research has repeatedly documented this pattern. Construction can move from foundation to walling, roofing and finishing over several years, financed through earned income, savings, family transfers, remittances, rotating savings arrangements and sometimes supplier credit (Arku, 2009; CAHF, 2024). This is not a marginal practice. It is one of the main ways urban housing is produced.

Incremental building is often described as a response to exclusion from the formal market. That description is partly correct but incomplete. It also has its own practical logic. A household can adjust expenditure to the timing of income, pause work when funds are scarce and resume when conditions improve. The ability to sequence construction can reduce the need to take a large loan at one moment. At the same time, incremental building has serious disadvantages. It can leave families exposed to inflation in material costs, delays in service provision, uncertain tenure and unequal dependence on family networks. It should not be romanticised. The point is not that self-building is automatically better than formal finance. The point is that it is a durable production system that policy cannot treat as a temporary residue.

2.3 Recognition, legibility and the gap in the literature

The literature on housing finance explains the barriers to mortgage access well. It has given less attention to the question of how policy categories themselves shape the meaning of affordability. Scott's idea of legibility is useful here. States govern through categories that make people, assets and transactions comparable. In housing, these include registered plots, documented income, loan accounts, completed units and recorded disbursements (Scott, 1998). Such categories are necessary for administration, but they can become restrictive when they are treated as the only credible evidence of need, capacity or commitment.

Fraser's distinction between redistribution and recognition adds a second dimension. Redistribution concerns where material resources go. Recognition concerns whether people and practices are granted standing in the first place (Fraser, 1995). In housing policy, the two are linked. A subsidy programme that accepts only formal pay slips and a registered title does not merely distribute finance selectively. It also recognises one form of economic life as suitable for support and leaves other forms outside the normal field of policy. This paper develops that insight by asking how policy instruments define the eligible beneficiary, what evidence they require and what form of housing production they assume. Its argument is not that scarcity is irrelevant. Rather, scarcity is distributed through institutional terms that are more favourable to some households than others.

3. Methodology

This paper uses qualitative documentary policy analysis. The evidence base is limited to publicly available material: Ghana's National Housing Policy; national budget statements; official information from the National Homeownership Fund; housing finance data from the Centre for Affordable Housing Finance in Africa; public accounts of the Saglemi project; and peer-reviewed scholarship on housing finance, land registration and incremental construction. The documents were selected for three reasons. First, they identify the stated objectives of housing policy. Second, they describe the financial instruments through which those objectives are meant to be achieved. Third, they provide an official or well-documented account of a major project in which policy design and implementation became publicly contested.

The analysis used a simple interpretive framework. Each document was read for four questions: Who is identified as the intended beneficiary? What evidence of income, tenure or repayment capacity is required? What form of housing is supported? And what counts as a successful outcome? This makes it possible to compare the policy model of a completed dwelling financed through a mortgage with the documented pattern of incremental self-building.

Saglemi is treated as an illustrative case, not as a representative case and not as a test of every housing programme in Ghana. Its value lies in the density of the public record. Budget statements, court reporting, official announcements and project accounts make visible the assumptions that are often less explicit in policy language. Documentary analysis cannot show how every household evaluates risk or manages construction. Nor can it measure the full scale of informal savings and remittances. Its strength is different. It shows how rules are written before households encounter them, and how official definitions of eligibility and success shape the distribution of support.

4. Findings: Saglemi and the Terms of Formal Affordability

4.1 A policy model built around the completed unit

The Saglemi Affordable Housing Project was approved as a large-scale response to Ghana's housing shortage. Parliament approved a 200 million United States dollar facility for the construction of 5,000 units at Saglemi Old Ningo. The project was to be delivered by Construtora OAS, and the homes were intended to be sold through mortgage arrangements associated with Ghana Home Loans (Ablordeppey, 2021). The model was straightforward: external finance would fund construction, a private contractor would produce completed units, and eligible households would acquire them through formal credit.

This model has administrative appeal. A ministry can specify several units. A contractor can be paid against milestones. A lender can assess applicants through standard criteria. The outputs are visible and comparable. In the 2018 Budget Statement, the government reported that the first phase, comprising 1,502 units, was 75 per cent complete (Ministry of Finance, 2018, para. 529). The language of progress was therefore framed around the physical completion of dwellings.

The limitation is that this model treat affordability as something created at the point of sale. It assumes that the central problem is to reduce the price of a finished house or the interest charged on the mortgage used to buy it. It pays less attention to whether intended buyers can produce a deposit, demonstrate steady income, accept a fixed repayment schedule and satisfy the documentation requirements of mortgage finance. In this respect, Saglemi was not unusual. The 2018 mortgage initiative similarly proposed subsidised mortgages through formal financial institutions, beginning with public sector workers. The National Homeownership Fund has likewise concentrated on mortgage products delivered through banks. These are different programmes, but they share a basic premise: access is achieved when a household can enter a formal purchase transaction.

4.2 Delivery failure and the limits of project accounting

Saglemi also became an accountability case. In 2021, the Attorney General brought criminal charges against former officials and others connected to the project. The prosecution alleged that almost 196.43 million dollars had been spent, that only 668 units had been completed, that the units were not habitable and that none had been sold (Ablordeppey, 2021). These were allegations presented in criminal proceedings, not final judicial findings, and they should be treated with that care. They nevertheless reveal an important point about housing policy assessment. Financial disbursement, reported physical progress, and the number of structures on a site do not by themselves establish that affordable housing has been delivered.

A housing programme can meet parts of its project accounting requirements while still failing to produce homes that are serviced, occupied and accessible to the intended group. This is not an argument that formal construction is inherently misguided. Saglemi involved specific issues of contracting, oversight, infrastructure and public accountability that cannot be reduced to a single design problem. Its broader lesson is narrower but significant: completed structures are not the same as affordable homes, and a mortgage arrangement is not the same as a feasible route to ownership.

4.3 Institutional terms produce exclusion before application

The mismatch between formal finance and incremental self-building becomes clearer when affordability is examined in institutional terms. Mortgage programmes commonly rely on regular income, a deposit, formal documentation and a repayment schedule fixed in advance. These requirements are not arbitrary. They protect lenders and can protect borrowers from unsuitable credit. Yet they also operate as an entry boundary. A household with real but irregular income may be unable to make that income legible to a bank. A household with a customary claim to land may be unable to meet the documentary standard required for collateral. A household that can buy materials in stages may be unable to service a monthly repayment for a completed unit.

The result is often exclusion before application. A person may never submit a mortgage application because the scheme is understood, correctly or otherwise, as intended for those with formal salaries, established credit histories and fully documented property. This is why the issue cannot be reduced to a low approval rate. The policy design itself signals who belongs within the scheme. The contrast with incremental construction is sharp. CAHF reports that about 90 per cent of housing supply is delivered by households and the contractors they engage, usually over five to fifteen years (CAHF, 2024). This route converts a large capital requirement into a sequence of smaller commitments. It is slower and often less secure, but it is more compatible with income that arrives unevenly.

The problem, then, is not that policy has failed to notice informal building. It is visible in every growing urban area. The problem is that it is weakly recognised as a field for subsidy design, finance and measurement. Savings used for a plot, a remittance used for roofing materials or a pause in construction during a difficult period do not fit easily into the categories through which the state and banks record housing performance. What cannot be easily recorded is less likely to become the basis of an intervention.

5. Discussion: From Price to Institutional Terms

The evidence suggests that Ghana's affordability problem is not best understood as a choice between formal finance and informal self-building. Both have a place. Formal mortgages can serve households with stable income and can support the production of completed housing at scale. Incremental building can provide flexibility where income is irregular, but it can also expose households to long delays, poor infrastructure and rising material costs. The more useful question is whether the current policy mix recognises the different ways households assemble housing and the different risks they carry.

Reframing affordability as a question of institutional terms changes the policy debate in three ways. First, it changes what should be measured. Counting mortgage disbursements and completed units remains important, but it captures only part of the housing system. Housing data should also track stages of self-building, sources of construction finance, tenure documentation, access to infrastructure and the duration of building projects. Better measurement would not make incremental construction easier, but it would make it less likely to be treated as an afterthought in policy.

Second, it changes the kind of finance that is worth supporting. A conventional mortgage is designed for the purchase of a completed asset. It is not the only way to reduce housing risk. Carefully regulated staged loans, savings-linked products, building materials credit and insurance against construction phase shocks may be more consistent with incremental building. Such instruments would need consumer protection, transparent pricing and safeguards against over lending. The aim is not to move risk from the state or banks to low-income households. It is to design support around the timing through which many households already finance construction.

Third, it changes the treatment of tenure and income evidence. Full registered title and formal employment are strong forms of proof, but they are not the only possible signs of a household's attachment to land or capacity to save. Intermediate tenure documentation, verified savings records, payment histories and supplier relationships may help institutions assess risk without requiring households to complete every stage of formalisation before receiving any support. This is not a proposal to abandon standards. It is a proposal to distinguish between standards that manage risk and standards that unnecessarily narrow the field of eligible households.

Saglemi adds a fourth point. Affordability must include accountability. Programmes should be assessed not simply by the value of finance committed or the number of units announced, but by whether homes are completed, serviced, occupied and reachable by the groups named in policy. This requires transparent reporting on project costs, allocation rules, purchaser profiles, infrastructure and occupancy. It also requires a clear distinction between physical progress, financial disbursement and actual access.

The wider development issue is one of urban inequality. When public support is organised around a narrow model of the eligible household, it tends to reinforce existing advantages in formal employment, documentation and access to land. Recognition does not solve the housing shortage on its own. It does, however, identify why some households are positioned to benefit from public intervention while others are expected to build without it. That is the institutional problem at the centre of affordability.

6. Conclusion

Ghana's housing challenge cannot be explained only by a shortage of supply, high interest rates or limited long-term credit. These constraints matter, but they do not fully explain why affordable housing initiatives are so often organised around a buyer who has regular recorded income, a deposit, formal tenure documentation and the ability to purchase a completed unit through a mortgage. This paper has argued that the missing issue is recognition.

Its central contribution is to treat affordability as a question of institutional terms rather than price thresholds alone. The question is not only whether a house is cheap enough in principle. It is whether the timing of payments, evidence of income, tenure requirements and allocation rules allow households to enter the route to housing that policy supports. Saglemi illustrates the limits of a model that equates affordable housing with completed units and mortgage access. The case also shows why public accountability must be part of affordability: funds committed and structures built do not automatically translate into usable homes for intended beneficiaries.

Incremental self -building should not be idealised. It can be slow, insecure and unequal. Yet it is a central part of how housing is produced in Ghana. Housing policy will remain limited if it continues to support completed units alone. A more inclusive approach would measure, regulate and support the incremental systems through which households already assemble homes, while improving tenure security, infrastructure, consumer protection and access to finance. That is what it would mean to make affordability answerable to the terms on which most people actually build.

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GEOPOLITICAL ALIGNMENT AND POVERTY OUTCOMES: DOES IT MATTER WHICH BLOC FINANCES YOUR DEVELOPMENT?

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Abstract

This paper asks whether the identity of the external development financier shapes household poverty outcomes in developing countries. Exploiting the structural di- vergence between Western conditional finance and Chinese project-tied infrastruc- ture finance across 45 Sub-Saharan African and Southeast Asian economies over 2000–2020, we applyfour complementary identification designs with distinctiden- tifying assumptions: Bartik shift-share instrumental variables, regression disconti- nuity at the IDA income threshold, subnational geocoded project placement, and stacked difference-in-differences aroundIMF program entry. Instrumented Chinese development financeis associated with a 5.3–7.8percentage point increasein the na- tional poverty headcount($3.65/day, 2017 PPP), a resultrobust to commodity price controls that leave the coefficient stable within 1.4 percent. Project-adjacent districts show a 0.274 standard deviation improvement in household wealth and improved child survival, consistent with local connectivity gains that are dominated at the na- tional level by the aggregate fiscalburden of Chinesedebt service. IMF programen- try raises the poverty headcountby 4.2 percentage points in the short run, consistent with social spending compression under binding deficit ceilings; this result applies to Sub-Saharan African economies and should be generalised with caution. Geopo- litical alignment moderates the conditionality cost: countries more closely aligned with Chinaexperience a smallerpoverty increase from IMF entry,directionally con- sistent with the outside-option effect derived in the theoretical framework. Panel cointegration confirms the two-wayfixed effects estimatescapture a valid long-run equilibrium relationship.

Keywords: *Development finance; Conditionality; Chinese aid; Poverty; Shift-share; Regression discontinuity; Subnational; IMF programs; Geopolitical alignment*
JEL codes: F35, O11, O19, I32, F51, C26

1.**Introduction**

The architecture of global development finance has been transformed more fundamentally in the past two decades than in the preceding half-century. For most of the post-Bretton Woods era, developing countriesseeking external capitaloperated within a relatively uni- fied international financial system organised around the IMF, the World Bank, and a coali- tion of Western bilateral donors whose conditionality frameworks shared a common in- tellectual and institutional foundation. That system has fractured. China's emergence as a major development financier, operating through the Export-Import Bank of China and the Belt and Road Initiative, has created a genuinely competitive financing environment in which recipient governments can increasingly choose between patrons whose models of engagement differ not merely in scale but in structure, in the conditions they impose, and in the development theory that animates them.

The scale of this transformation is no longer in dispute. China committed in excess of USD 843 billion in overseas development finance between 2000 and 2017, becoming a creditor of comparable importance to the World Bank across much of the developing world. What remains empirically unresolved is whether this structural change has con- sequences that reach below national aggregates to affect the material conditions of poor households. Does the identity of the external financier — and the conditionality regime embedded in that identity — shape poverty outcomes at the household level?

The analytical argument rests on a structural observation about the two dominant mod- els. Western finance,channelled through the IMF, the World Bank, and bilateral donors, operates through a conditionality architecture that requires fiscal adjustment during pro- gram phases: compressing subsidies, containing public sector wage bills, narrowing so- cial transfers, and liberalising trade and capitalaccounts. The poverty implications of this model have a well-documented short-run direction: adjustment-phase conditionality tends to reduce spending on services that protect poor households (Dreher, 2006; Nooruddin and Simmons, 2006). Chinese finance operates through a fundamentally different logic: collateral-heavy and infrastructure-focused, it carries no conditions on domestic fiscalor social policy, and may reduce certain dimensions of poverty — particularly those asso- ciated with physical isolation — without improving income distribution or building the fiscal base necessary for sustained poverty reduction after the project cycle ends.

What This Paper Does
We assemble a novel dataset linking geocoded development finance flows from Chi- nese and Westernsources to householdpoverty outcomes across 45 Sub-Saharan African and Southeast Asian economies over 2000–2020, yielding 945 country-year and 75,589 district-year observations. The central identification challenge is that geopolitical align- ment is endogenous to nearly everything that shapes povertytrajectories. We address this through four complementary identification designs, arguing that convergence of esti- mates across designs with distinct identifying assumptions constitutes stronger evidence than any single strategy. The first exploits shift-share variationin Chinese lendingsupply using a Bartik instrument, with commodity price controls confirming the exclusion re- striction. Thesecond exploits the IDA eligibility discontinuity at the World Bank income threshold. The third exploits subnational geocoded project placement, comparing wel- fare outcomesin project-adjacent and non-adjacent districts within the same country. The fourth uses stacked difference-in-differences around IMF program entry. An additional stacked eventstudy exploiting IDA graduation eventsprovides supplementary descriptive evidence on the poverty trajectory following threshold crossing.

What This Paper Finds
Three principal findingsemerge. First, Chinesedevelopment finance, instrumented with a Bartik shift-share instrument, is associated with a 5.3–7.8percentage point increasein the national poverty headcount (F-statistics 12.4–16.6; coefficient stable within 1.4 percent after commodity price controls). The aggregate poverty-increasing effect is consistent with the resource collateralisation channel: pledging export revenues as debt collateral contractsnet domestic revenueand limits social expenditure capacity. Second, at the sub- national level, project-adjacent districts record a 0.274 standard deviation improvement in householdwealth and improvedchild survival, with a monotonedose-response across project count. These local connectivity gainsare compatible with the aggregate poverty- increasing effect, as the direct benefits to project-adjacent communities (approximately 5–10 percent of the national population) are dominated at the national level by the dif- fuse fiscal burden of Chinese debt service. Third, IMF program entry raises the poverty headcount by 4.2 percentage pointsin the short run, with Western ODA crowding out by programme year five, consistent with social spendingcompression under bindingdeficit ceilings. Countries more closely aligned with China experience a smaller poverty in- crease from IMF entry (+3.1 versus +4.1 percentage points), directionally consistent with the outside-option effect of the theoretical framework.

Contributions
This paper makes three distinct contributions. First, it moves conditionality to the cen- tre of the aid-poverty analysis, treating the financing regime as the primary treatment variable. Second, it introduces household-level poverty as the dependent variable in the Chinese development finance literature, applying credible causal identification to the com- parison betweenfinancing regimes. Third, it providesa comprehensive identification ar- chitecture — four designs with fundamentally different identifying assumptions — whose convergence constitutes the primary evidentiary claim.
The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section 2 documents the insti- tutional background. Section 3 reviews the literature. Section 4 presents the theoreti- cal framework. Section 5 describes the data. Section 6 develops the empirical strategy. Section 7 presents the main results. Section 8 reports robustness exercises. Section 9 concludes.

2.Institutional Background and Stylised Facts

2.1. Western Concessional Finance

The World Bank's IDA provides credits at interest rates of 0.75–1.25 percent and matu- rities of 25–40 years to countries below an annually revised GNI threshold, rising from USD 885 in 2000 to USD 1,215 by 2014 before moderating to USD 1,185 over 2018– 2020. The CPIA rating determines IDA allocation, embedding a selectivity mechanism that ties concessional resources to governance quality, fiscal management, and structural reform implementation. Countries graduating above the threshold transition to IBRD terms, creating a sharp discontinuity in both the volume and the conditionality structure of Western finance that the regression discontinuity design in Section 6 exploits.

The IMF attaches prior actions, structural benchmarks, and quantitative performance criteria to program disbursements. In our sample, 31 countries participated in at least one IMF programduring 2000–2020, accounting for 11.0 percentof country-year obser- vations (14.9 percent in SSA; zero in SEA). Conditionality intensity from the MONA database averages 177.3 conditions per program year.Bilateral ODA from OECD-DAC donors averaged USD 1,119.7 millionper country-year, with 94.4 percentof observations recording positive flows.

2.1. Chinese Development Finance

China's overseas development finance — channelled through China Eximbank and the China Development Bank, institutionalised withinthe Belt and Road Initiative from 2013
— differs from Westernconcessional finance in three ways: itis project-tied to physical infrastructure; it carriesno conditions on domestic fiscal policy, social spending, or gov- ernance; and it frequently employsnatural resource collateralisation. Figure 1 documents the dramaticgrowth of Chinesecommitments, rising from USD 180 million in 2000 to a peak exceeding USD 15 billionin 2011 before moderating after BRI institutionalisation. The distribution is concentrated: 56.4 percent of country-year observations record zero Chinese commitments, against only 5.6 percent for Western ODA.

2.2. Geopolitical Alignmentand Sample Descriptives

We measure alignmentusing the Bailey, Strezhnevand Voeten (2017) UNGA ideal point estimates, expressed as the negative absolute distance between a country's annual ideal point and China's. The samplemean is −0.304 (SD = 0.241), with SSA averaging
−0.291 and SEA −0.401. Figure 2 illustrates the positive correlation between alignment
and Chinese financereceipt. Table 1 presents full summary statistics. The mean poverty headcount at \$3.65/day is 58.3 percent (SD = 21.3), with SSA averaging 60.7 percent against 43.2 percent for SEA. No Southeast Asian country in the sample participated in an IMF program during2000–2020, meaning the conditionality channel is identified ex- clusively from SSA variation. Figure 3summarises the regional distribution of poverty and financing composition.

3.Related Literature

2.1. Aid, Conditionality, and Poverty

Burnside and Dollar (2000) established that aid raises growth in countries with sound policies; Easterly, Levine and Roodman (2004) demonstrated the fragility of this result. Clemens et al. (2012) partially resolved the controversy by distinguishing early-impact infrastructure aid from humanitarian transfers. Ravallion (2001) shows that the poverty elasticity of growth varies substantially with initial inequality, implying that the distri- butional path of development, not merely its pace, determines household poverty out- comes. The most directly relevant strand concerns conditionality's effects on social ex- penditure. Nooruddin and Simmons (2006) show IMF program countries reduce social service spending relative to administrative and security expenditure. Dreher (2006) docu- ments that non-compliance with structural benchmarks is pervasive, qualifying how me- chanically the adjustment path translates into welfare outcomes — a finding we engage with directly in the results section. None of these papers treats the conditionality regime as the primary treatment variable; this paper makes that move.

3.2. Infrastructure Financeand Poverty

Donaldson (2018) provides the most credible causal estimate, using railroad network structure to instrument construction in colonial India. Jedwab and Moradi (2016) doc- ument persistent effects of colonial African railroads more than a century after con- struction. Dinkelman (2011) findssubstantial employment effectsof rural electrification. Banerjee, Duflo and Qian (2020) documentroad access effectsspatially bounded to cor- ridor counties, directly relevant to the subnational geocoded design. This paper asks not what povertyeffects infrastructure has, but whetherthe financier's identityand accompa- nying conditionality shape those effects.

3.3. Chinese Development Finance and Donor Competition

Dreher and Fuchs (2015) show Chinese aid allocation responds to UNGA voting be- haviourand resource endowments. Dreher et al. (2019) find Chinese aid in Africaconcen- trates near political leaders' birthplaces, motivating the pre-survey project selection rule in Design 4.Kuziemko and Werker(2006) show Security Council membership yields approximately USD 16 million in additional US aid annually. Bueno de Mesquita and Smith (2009) model how alternative financing sources weaken conditionality's bargaining leverage, directly motivating Proposition 1. The existingliterature has not applied credi- ble causal identification to the household-level poverty comparison betweenChinese and Western financing regimes. This paper fills that gap.

4.Theoretical Framework

4.1. Environment

Consider a small open economy with household income $y \sim F(y; \theta)$, where θ is an inequality parameter. The poverty headcount is $H \equiv F(z; \theta)$ for poverty line z. The government maximises:

$$V(g, k; \theta) = \alpha W_S(g; \theta) + (1 - \alpha) W_K(k), \quad (1)$$

where g is social services spending and k is connectivity infrastructure. Both $W_S$and $W_K$are strictly concave; $\partial^2 W_S/\partial g \partial\theta > 0$ so social spending disproportionately benefits households near the poverty line. For tractability, θ is held fixed in the comparative statics; Prediction 2 below is therefore a directional guideto the heterogeneity analysis ratherthan a structural derivation. The budget constraint is $R + A_W + A_C = g + k + D + B$, where R is domestic revenue, D is debt service, and B is the primary balance.

4.2. The Western Conditionality Contract

The Westernfinancier offers (A_W, Ω_W) where $\Omega_W = \{B \geqslant -\delta^*, g \geqslant \sigma_W, \Gamma \geqslant \gamma_W\}$: a deficit ceiling,social spending floor, and governance benchmark. Countries enter programs under fiscal distress, so the deficit ceiling binds and equilibrium social spending satisfies $g^* < g^\circ$, generating a short-run povertyincrease $\Delta H_W > 0$. The long-run case for conditionality rests on fiscal stabilisation, conditional on credible enforcement (Svensson, 2000); we engage with the enforcement limitation in the results section.

4.3. Chinese Finance

The Chinese financier offers (A_C, Ω_C) where $\Omega_C = \{k \geqslant k_{min}, D_C = \lambda X\}$. The conditionality vector containsno constraints on g, thefiscal balance, or governance. Social spending remains at g°. Povertyreduction occurs through the connectivity channel— lower transaction costs push formerly isolated households above investment thresh- olds (following Age´nor, Bayraktar and El Aynaoui, 2008) — but the incomedistribution $F(y; \theta)$ is unchanged. The poverty reduction is therefore spatially bounded and concentrated rather than distributional and diffuse.

4.4. Equilibrium and Testable Predictions

The key comparative static is $d\delta^*/dV_C < 0$: as the Chinese outside option V_C becomes more attractive, Western conditionality must relax to retain the recipient. This outside- option effect maps more directlyonto bilateral ODA bargaining — where donor flexibility is greater — than onto IMF programdesign, which is shaped by Fund-wide fiscal assess- ment rather than bilateral negotiation. Design 5 therefore tests a reduced-form version of Prediction 5 rather than the structural mechanism. Five testable predictions follow:

Prediction 1. IMF program entry raises short-run poverty through social spending compression (Design 5).
Prediction 2. The poverty cost is largerin more unequalcountries (heterogeneity analysis).
Prediction 3. Chinese infrastructure projects reduce poverty in adjacent districts through the connectivity channel without shifting income distribution (Design 4).
Prediction 4. The poverty reduction is smaller in turnkey projects with limited local employment content (Design 4 heterogeneity).
Prediction 5. Countries more aligned with China experience weaker conditionality stringency on concurrent Western programs (Table 7).

5.Data and Sample Construction

5.1. Country-Year Panel

The main panel covers 45 countries — 39 in Sub-Saharan Africa and 6 in SoutheastAsia — over 2000–2020, yieldingN= 945 observations. The primaryoutcome is the poverty headcount at \$3.65 per day (2017 PPP) from the World Bank Poverty and Inequality Platform (PIP). The \$3.65/day measure achieves complete panel coverage because PIP constructs estimates for all country-years using interpolation and extrapolation based on national accounts growth rateswhere household surveysare unavailable. Coverageof 100 percent meansthat a PIP estimate existsfor every country-year; it does not imply a nation- ally representative survey was conductedin every year. Interpolation introduces classical measurement error in the outcome,which attenuates IV estimates towardzero and implies that our Bartik IV coefficients are conservative rather than inflated. The \$6.85/day upper- middle-income line providesthe primary robustness outcome (also 100 percent coverage;

Appendix Tables A1–A2).Chinese development financecommitments are from AidData GeoGCDF v1.0.1 (2014 constant USD millions). WesternODA disbursements are from OECD-CRS. Geopolitical alignment uses Bailey, Strezhnev and Voeten (2017) UNGA ideal points. IMF conditionality data come from the MONA database. Macro controls are from WDI, UCDP/PRIO, and the PRS Group.

5.2. Subnational ClusterPanel

The subnational panel links geocoded Chinese project locations (AidData GeoGCDF, pre- cision codes1–3) to DHS survey enumeration areas using a 50 km radius buffer,covering 75,589 clusters across 38 countries. The treatment indicator requires a Chinese project committed at least two years before the DHS survey date and within 50 km. This two- year requirement ensures projects precede the survey by sufficient time for connectivity benefits to materialise and addresses the concern in Dreher et al. (2019) about project placement endogeneity.

6 .Empirical Strategy

6.1. Design 1: Two-Way Fixed Effects

$$\text{Poverty}_{it} = \beta_1 \ln(\text{Chinese}_{it} + 1) + \beta_2 \ln(\text{Western}_{it} + 1) + x\,\gamma + \mu_i + \lambda_t + \varepsilon_{it}, \qquad (2)$$

with country fixed effects μ_i, year fixed effects λ_t, and standard errors clustered at the country level. Pedroni (1999) panel cointegration rejectsno cointegration at $p < 0.001$ for both poverty measures ($Z = -4.36$ for \$3.65/day; $Z = -4.19$ for \$6.85/day), validating TWFE in levels as a long-run estimator.

6.2. Design 2: Bartik Shift-Share IV

We instrument $\ln(\text{Chinese}_{it} + 1)$ with $Z_{it} = s_{i,pre} \times G_t$, where $s_{i,pre}$ is country i's pre- sample share of Chinese commitments (2000–2004, capped at 15 percent, Sudan ex- cluded) and G_t is the log of Chinese finance flows to 131 non-sample countries in year *t*. Year fixed effectsabsorb global time trends; macrocontrols capture country-level eco- nomic performance. To directly test the exclusion restriction against commodity price confounding — the most plausible threatfor resource-rich SSA economies — we add the World Bank non-fuel commodity price index and Brent crude oil price, each interacted with pre-sample naturalresource rents, as additional controls. The IV coefficient changes by at most 1.4 percent and the first-stage F-statistic is unchanged at 12.2, confirming the exclusion restriction is robust to commodity price channels (Appendix Table A5).

6.3. Design 3: Regression Discontinuity at the IDA Threshold(Supplementary)

The runningvariable x_{it} = ($GNI_{it}/Threshold_t$) − 1 centres each country-year at the IDA eligibility boundary.We estimate local polynomial RD with rectangular kernel and bandwidths h ∈ {25%, 50%, 75%, 100%} of the threshold. Two qualifications bear on in- terpretation. First, the first-stage estimatesare uniformly impreciseacross all bandwidth- polynomial combinations, limiting the reliability of the Wald IV estimates. Second, the stacked event study pre-trend F-statistic of 6.33 (p = 0.003) rejects the null of parallel pre-trends. This violation is structurally expected: IDA graduation is triggered by eco- nomic growth, meaning poverty was already declining before graduation. We therefore treat this design as supplementary descriptive evidence on the poverty trajectory following IDA threshold crossingrather than as a converging causal identification design.Placebo tests at ±10% of the true threshold find no discontinuity (all p > 0.47), confirming the threshold location is not spurious.

6.4. Design 4: Subnational Geocoded Project Placement

$$Y_{cdt} = \alpha\,\text{Treated\_pre}_{cdt} + \mathbf{z}'_{cdt}\delta + \phi_d + \phi_t + u_{cdt}, \tag{3}$$

with districtfixed effects ϕ_d and survey-year fixedeffects ϕ_t. Standard errorsare clustered at the district level.The timing placebotest — using only post-survey projects — yields acoefficient of −0.115*** on the wealthindex, opposite in sign to the pre-survey estimate (+0.263***). This sign reversal confirmsthat the pre-survey design successfully separates causal effects from Chinese project targeting toward poorer areas.

6.5. Design 5: Stacked DiD — IMF Program Entry

Following Baker, Larcker and Wang (2022), we construct a stacked dataset of 31 IMF program entry cohorts,each matched to 14 never-treated clean-control countries. All pre- trend testspass at conventional levels (poverty F = 0.76, p = 0.555; WesternODA F = 0.53, p = 0.717; Chinese finance F = 1.27, p = 0.299).

7.Main Results

7.1. TWFE Baseline (Table 2)

Without controls, the Chinese financecoefficient is positiveand insignificant (Column1:
$\hat{\beta}$ = +0.202, SE = 0.228). As macro controls and institutional variablesare added,
the coefficient shifts negative: Column 5 (+Polity) yields $\hat{\beta}$ = −0.579** (SE = 0.263)
and Column6 (+ICRG) yields $\hat{\beta}$ = −0.552** (SE = 0.276). Western ODA carries a
significantly negative coefficient in Columns 3–6, consistent with social spendingen- abling effects of concessional finance.Driscoll-Kraay standard errors,robust to serial correlation and cross-section dependence, inflate TWFE standard errorsby 2.2–4.7x, and Columns 1–4 lose significance under this correction (Appendix Table A5). Thisconfirms that Designs 2 and 4 provide the primary causal identification; the TWFE is presented as a long-run descriptive baseline.

7.2. Bartik Shift-Share IV (Table 3)

The Bartik instrument is strongly negative in the first stage (Columns 1–4: F-statistics 12.4–16.6, meeting the Stock-Yogo threshold). Second-stage estimates are uniformly pos- itive and significant: Column 1 yields $\hat{\beta}$ = +7.812*** (SE = 2.096); the fully controlled Column 4 yields $\hat{\beta}$ = +5.283*** (SE = 1.779). A one-unit increasein ln(Chinese finance+ 1) — approximately a doubling of commitments — is associated with a 5.3–7.8 percent- age point increase in the $3.65/day poverty headcount. The OLS comparator (Column 5: $\hat{\beta}$ = −0.078) diverges dramatically from the IV estimate, confirming endogeneity. The aggregate poverty-increasing effect is consistent with the resource collateralisation chan- nel: countries pledging export revenues as debt collateral experience a net domestic rev- enue contraction that limits social expenditure capacity. Geopolitical alignment carries a significant negative coefficient in Columns 3–4 (−9.99*** and −8.75***), indicating that countries more closely aligned with China face lower poverty rates after accounting for financing volumes.

7.3. IDA Regression Discontinuity — Supplementary Evidence(Table 4)

As noted in Section6, the first-stage RD estimates are imprecise acrossall specifications and the event studypre-trend F-statistic of 6.33 ($p = 0.003$) rejects parallelpre-trends. We accordingly interpretthe RD results as supplementary descriptive evidence. The reduced form at the preferred specification ($p = 2$, $h = 25\%$) is $\hat{\beta} = -9.683^{**}$ (SE = 4.143), indicating lower povertyin countries crossingthe IDA threshold. The stacked event study shows an average post-graduation poverty reduction of −9.1 percentage points deepening monotonically to −14.3 pp at five years,consistent with economicgrowth being the joint driver of both IDA graduation and poverty reduction. These patterns are corroborative of the paper's main findings without carrying independent causal identification.

7.4. Subnational Geocoded (Table 5)

With district fixed effects and controls (Column 3, N = 74,843 clusters), pre-survey project-adjacent districts show a $+0.274^{***}$ standard deviation wealth improvement (SE = 0.032). The effect is concentrated in urban clusters ($+0.416^{***}$); rural effects are positive but imprecise (+0.027). The dose-response confirms a monotone relationship: one project within 50 km yields $+0.170^{***}$ SD; two or more yield $+0.356^{***}$ SD. Child survival im- proves by $+0.005^{***}$ percentage points.

These local welfare gains are quantitatively compatible with the aggregate poverty- increasing effect in Design 2. Ata 50 km radius, Chinese infrastructure projects directly affect approximately 5–10 percent of a country's population, concentrated in urban and peri-urban clusters. Translating the +0.274 SD wealth gain through the baseline poverty- wealth gradient implies a local poverty reduction of roughly 2 percentage points for directly exposed clusters. Averaged across the full national population — including areas unaffected by projects and subject to the fiscal burden of Chinese debt service — this local gain is dominated by the aggregate collateralisation and debt-service effects captured by the Bartik IV estimate. The two designs are therefore measuring distinct objects: Design 4 identifies the local connectivity benefit of individual projects, while Design 2 identifies the national-level fiscal consequence of aggregate Chinese lending.

7.5. IMF Stacked DiD and Prediction 5 (Tables 6–7)

The DiD estimate for poverty is $+4.236^{*}$ (SE = 2.469, N = 2,971), with all pre-trend tests passing(Table 6). The poverty cost rises gradually: $+2.5^{*}$ at $t = 2$, $+3.7^{*}$ at $t = 3$,$+5.7^{**}$ at $t = 4$. Western ODA begins to crowd out at $t = 4$ (-0.298^{*}) and $t = 5$ (-0.361^{**}), consistent with conditionality tightening and disbursement delays.

An important qualification concerns conditionality enforcement. Dreher (2006) documents that non-compliance with IMF structural benchmarks is pervasive and that disbursement continues despite technical non-compliance in many program years. If conditionality is frequently unenforced, the social spending compression mechanism is weaker than the model assumes, and the +4.2 pp DiD estimate captures the combined effect of conditionality exposure and partial enforcement rather than full compliance. The esti- mate is best interpreted as the average poverty effect of IMF program entry, not of fully enforced conditionality.

Table 7 tests Prediction 5 directly. Countries split at the pre-program alignment me- dian show that high China-alignment cohorts experience a smaller povertyincrease from IMF entry (+3.111, SE = 2.755) relative to low-alignment cohorts(+4.100, SE = 3.023), consistent with the outside-option logic of Proposition 1. The continuous interaction of Post × Treated × Alignment is negative (−0.523, SE = 0.558) as predicted, though be-
low conventional significance thresholds. We do not overstate this finding: the mechanism
is directionally supported and the sign is robust, but statistical power with 31 cohorts is insufficient for a preciseestimate. The directtest of whetheralignment predicts condition- ality intensity yields a null resultin the program-year sample, consistent with institutional rigidities in IMF program design that limit the bilateral bargaining mechanism implied by Proposition 1. We therefore treat Prediction 5 as directionally confirmed rather than definitively established.

Since Design 5 variation is derived entirely from Sub-Saharan Africa — no Southeast Asian country in the sample participated in an IMF program during 2000–2020 — the conditionality results apply to SSA economies at the point of first program entry and should be generalised to other regions with caution.

8.Robustness

8.1. Alternative Poverty Measures

All designsare re-estimated usingthe \$6.85/day upper-middle-income povertyline (Ap- pendix Tables A1–A2). Bartik IV estimates remainsignificantly positive (Column4: +5.941**, SE = 2.363; F = 12.4) and the IMF DiD yields +3.889** (SE = 1.817). All qualitative conclusions are preserved.

8.2. Commodity Price Controls

Appendix Table A5 directly teststhe exclusion restriction of the Bartikinstrument against commodity priceconfounding. Adding the WorldBank non-fuel commodity price index and Brent crude oil price (each interacted with pre-sample natural resource rents) to the macro-controlled specification (Column3 of Table 3) changes the Chinese financecoef- ficient by 0.2–1.4 percent and leaves the first-stage F-statistic unchanged at 12.2. The exclusion restriction survives this direct test.

8.3. Alignment Endogeneity and Lagged UNGA Ideal Points

Appendix Table A6 addresses the concern that UNGA voting alignment may adjust en- dogenously to Chinese finance receipt. Replacing the contemporaneous alignment vari- able with lags of one, two, and three years produces Chinesefinance coefficients of −0.074, −0.012, and −0.008 respectively, comparedwith −0.003 for the contempora-neous measure — all small and statistically insignificant, confirming that alignment is not mechanically driving the Chinese finance coefficient in the TWFE regardless of lag structure.

8.4. Panel Cointegration and First Differences

Pedroni (1999) rejects no cointegration at $p < 0.001$ for both poverty measures (Ap- pendix Table A3), validating TWFE in levels as a long-run estimator. First-difference estimates produce smaller coefficients (−0.028 to −0.039*) consistent with multi-year infrastructure implementation lags. The IPS panel unit root test cannot reject a unit root, but the cointegration result confirms the TWFE captures a genuine long-run equilibrium relationship rather than a spurious regression.

8.5. SSA-Only Subsample

Appendix Table A7 re-estimates the TWFE on the 39 SSA countriesonly (N = 819). The Chinese finance coefficient in the macro-controlled specification is −0.180 (SE = 0.130) versus −0.003 (SE = 0.112) in the full sample, directionally consistent and somewhat larger in SSA, thoughboth are statistically insignificant in the TWFE undercountry fixed effects — reinforcing that Design 2 (Bartik IV) provides the primary causal identification.

9. Conclusion

This paper provides comprehensive causal evidence on whether the identity of the development financier shapes household poverty outcomes in developing countries. Four identification designs appliedto 45 Sub-Saharan African and Southeast Asianeconomies over 2000–2020 converge on a consistent but nuanced picture.

Chinese development finance, instrumented with global lendingsupply shocks robust to commodity price controls, is associated with a 5–8 percentage point increase in the national povertyheadcount, consistent with the resourcecollateralisation channel. Yet at the subnational level, project-adjacent districts show significant welfare gains, confirming that individual infrastructure projects generate genuineconnectivity benefits that coexist with but do not offset the aggregate fiscal burden of Chinese debt service. IMF program conditionality raisespoverty by approximately 4 percentage pointsin the short run in Sub- Saharan African economies — this result is identified from SSA variation and should not be generalised mechanically to other regions. Countries more closely aligned with China experience a smallerpoverty cost from IMF entry,directionally consistent with the outside-option logic of the theoretical framework, though the precision of this estimateis limited by the available sample of program entry events.

Three implications follow for policy. First, recipient governments face a genuinedis- tributional trade-off in financing choice: Chinese finance generates local connectivity gains but may impose fiscal costs that raise aggregate poverty; Western conditional fi- nance may stabilise fiscal positions in the long run but imposes adjustment costs that fall disproportionately on poor households in the short run. Second, the outside-option logic implies that geopolitical competition between financing blocs may yield inadvertent welfare benefits if it moderates conditionality stringency — a hypothesis directionally supported by the Prediction 5 tests and warranting further investigation as data on con- ditionality compliance and bilateral bargaining improve. Third, the disconnect between aggregate and local effects of Chinese financesuggests that fiscal governance mattersas much as financing volume: countries that receive Chinese finance with strong domestic revenue capacity and limited resource collateralisation are better positioned to capture local connectivity gains without absorbing the aggregate fiscal burden.

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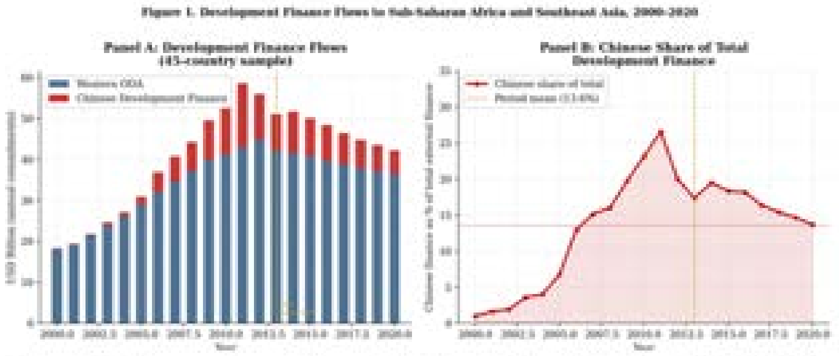

Figure 1: Development Finance Flows to Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia, 2000–2020

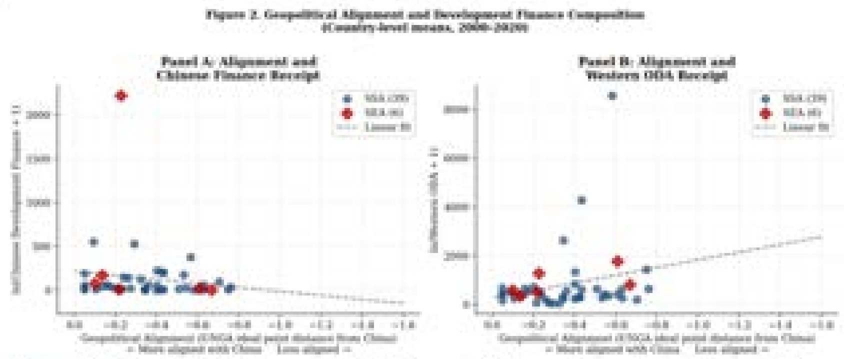

Figure 2: Geopolitical Alignment and Development Finance Composition (Country Means, 2000–2020)

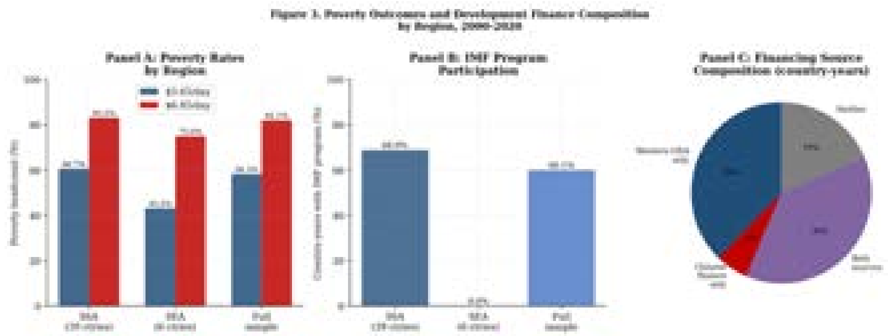

Figure 3: Poverty Outcomes and Development Finance Composition by Region, 2000–2020

Table 1: Summary Statistics: Development Finance and Poverty, 2000–2020

Variable	Full sample (N = 945)	SSA (N = 819)	SEA (N = 126)	SD
Panel A: Outcome variables				
Poverty headcount, $3.65/day (%) [main]	58.3	60.7	43.2	21.3
Poverty headcount, $6.85/day (%) [robustness]	82.1	83.2	75.0	15.0
Panel B: Treatment variables				
Chinese development finance (USD mn.)	104.6	92.1	185.4	336.4
Share with positive flows (%)	43.6	41.2	56.3	—
Western ODA disbursements (USD mn.)	1,119.7	1,079.4	1,341.2	1,396.5
Share with positive flows (%)	94.4	93.8	97.6	—
Geopolitical alignment (UNGA ideal point)	−0.304	−0.291	−0.401	0.241
Panel C: Control variables				
GDP growth (%)	1.99	1.44	5.43	5.70
GNI per capita (USD)	1,389	1,342	1,681	1,593
Conflict indicator (0/1)	0.43	0.44	0.31	0.49
Polity score (normalised, 0–1)	0.64	0.62	0.74	0.23
IMF program participation (%)	11.0	14.9	0.0	—
IMF conditionality intensity (count)	177.3	204.6	0.0	572.8
Observations	945	819	126	
Countries	45	39	6	

Table 2: TWFE Baseline: Chinese Finance and Poverty ($3.65/day)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ln(Chinese Finance + 1)	0.202	0.185	0.173	−0.037	−0.579**	−0.552**
	(0.228)	(0.225)	(0.185)	(0.107)	(0.263)	(0.276)
ln(Western ODA + 1)		0.312	−1.828**	−1.513***	−2.556**	−2.700**
		(0.928)	(0.751)	(0.540)	(1.268)	(1.271)
Geopolitical Alignment			−1.620	−1.168	−2.381	−3.795
			(2.285)	(1.992)	(2.471)	(2.898)
Polity Score (0–1)					12.312	6.592
					(10.690)	(10.855)
ICRG Political Risk (0–1)						13.098*
						(6.908)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Macro controls	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
N	945	945	900	877	577	469
Within R^2	0.006	0.008	0.034	0.174	0.242	0.300

Table 3: Bartik Shift-Share IV: Chinese Finance and Poverty ($3.65/day)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Panel A — First Stage: ln(Chinese Finance + 1)						
Bartik Instrument	−8.435***	−8.467***	−8.611***	−8.292***	−5.809**	−6.669***
	(2.357)	(2.354)	(2.435)	(2.049)	(2.779)	(2.374)
First-stage F	12.8	16.6	15.8	12.4	4.4†	5.0†
Panel B — Second Stage: Poverty headcount at $3.65/day (%)						
ln(Chinese Finance + 1)	7.812***	7.818***	6.635***	5.283***	8.382**	7.527**
	(2.096)	(2.095)	(1.941)	(1.779)	(3.197)	(2.797)
ln(Western ODA + 1)		0.053	−1.811	−1.288	−2.398	−3.160
		(1.092)	(1.541)	(1.248)	(2.229)	(2.159)
Geopolitical Alignment			−9.990***	−8.752***	−9.477**	−12.083**
			(2.792)	(2.446)	(4.407)	(5.182)
Country FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Year FE	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Macro controls	No	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Polity	No	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
N	660	660	632	609	442	362
Instrument valid	✓	✓	✓	✓	†	†

Table 4: IDA Regression Discontinuity and Stacked Event Study (Supplementary Evidence)

	Linear (p = 1)				*Quadratic (p = 2)*			
	h = 25%	h = 50%	h = 75%	h = 100%	h = 25%	h = 50%	h = 75%	h = 100%
Panel A — First Stage (imprecise; Wald IV not recommended as causal)								
IDA Ineligible	0.455	0.504	0.855	0.776	0.410	0.520	0.353	0.545
	(0.759)	(0.635)	(0.518)	(0.470)	(1.165)	(0.853)	(0.728)	(0.720)
Panel B — Reduced Form: IDA Ineligible → Poverty (%)								
IDA Ineligible	−9.100	−6.066	−1.581	−1.726	−9.683**	−5.940	−6.364	−4.646
	(5.284)	(4.385)	(4.971)	(4.740)	(4.143)	(6.689)	(5.477)	(5.426)
Panel C — Wald IV (supplementary; first stage imprecise)								
ln(Chinese Finance + 1)	−19.98	−12.03	−1.85	−2.22	−23.64**	−11.43	−18.04	−8.52
	(11.60)	(8.69)	(5.81)	(6.10)	(10.11)	(12.88)	(15.53)	(9.95)
N	131	308	522	582	131	308	522	582
Controls	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Panel D — Stacked Event Study: IDA Graduation (supplementary descriptive, N = 20 events)								
t = 0	−3.467*** (0.863)				t = 3	−10.524*** (1.962)		
t = 1	−6.129*** (1.174)				t = 4	−11.904*** (2.622)		
t = 2	−8.021*** (1.509)				t = 5	−14.305*** (2.991)		
Average post-graduation effect: −9.1 pp Pre-trend F = 6.33 (p = 0.003) — see text								

Table 5: Subnational Geocoded: Chinese Infrastructure Projects and Welfare

	(1) Country FE	(2) District FE	(3) +Controls	(4) Continuous	(5) Urban	(6) Rural
Panel A — DHS Wealth Index (standardised)						
Treated (pre-survey, 50km)	0.690***	0.263***	0.274***		0.416***	0.027
	(0.050)	(0.032)	(0.032)		(0.058)	(0.022)
ln(Chinese commitment + 1)				0.016***		
				(0.001)		
N (clusters)	74,936	74,843	74,843	74,843	26,227	47,726
Panel B — Child Survival Rate						
Treated (pre-survey, 50km)	0.006***	0.011***	0.005***		0.005**	0.005***
	(0.001)	(0.001)	(0.001)		(0.002)	(0.001)
N (clusters)	46,674	46,625	46,625	46,625	15,416	30,117
Panel C — Dose-Response (Wealth Index)						
1 project within 50km	0.170*** (0.025)					
2+ projects within 50km	0.356*** (0.034)					

Table 6: IMF Stacked DiD: Program Entry and Poverty ($3.65/day)

Event time	Poverty (pp)	Western ODA	Chinese Finance
Panel A — Event-Study Coefficients (reference: $t = -1$)			
$t = -5$	−4.727	−0.090	−0.482
	(3.159)	(0.241)	(0.869)
$t = -4$	−2.254	−0.022	0.681
	(2.317)	(0.163)	(0.702)
$t = -3$	−0.160	0.118	0.896
	(1.696)	(0.154)	(0.699)
$t = -2$	−0.339	0.059	0.198
	(0.899)	(0.112)	(0.467)
$t = 0$	1.189	0.097	−0.471
	(0.818)	(0.100)	(0.545)
$t = 1$	1.475	0.135	−0.500
	(1.195)	(0.149)	(0.637)
$t = 2$	2.455*	0.003	0.504
	(1.426)	(0.142)	(0.691)
$t = 3$	3.651*	−0.097	0.498
	(2.078)	(0.172)	(0.742)
$t = 4$	5.712**	−0.298*	1.254
	(2.787)	(0.160)	(0.763)
$t = 5$	4.549	−0.361**	0.338
	(2.875)	(0.164)	(0.528)
Panel B — DiD Summary			
Post × Treated	4.236*	−0.112	−0.026
	(2.469)	(0.181)	(0.429)
N	2,971	2,971	2,971
Pre-trend F	0.76 ($p = 0.555$)	0.53 ($p = 0.717$)	1.27 ($p = 0.299$)

Table 7: Prediction 5: Geopolitical Alignment and the IMF Conditionality Poverty Cost

	Full sample	High alignment (closer to China)	Low alignment (closer to West)
Panel A — IMF Stacked DiD split by pre-program alignment (dep. var.: poverty headcount \$3.65/day, pp)			
DiD estimate (Post × Treated)	3.862	3.111	4.100
	(2.618)	(2.755)	(3.023)
N	4,530	2,070	2,370
Panel B — Continuous alignment interaction			
Post × Treated	3.980		
	(2.628)		
Post × Treated × Alignment	−0.523		
	(0.558)		
N	4,530		
Panel C — Does alignment predict conditionality intensity? (program years only)			
Geopolitical Alignment (contemporaneous)	+378.4		
	(570.7)		
Geopolitical Alignment (with year FE)	−14.0		
	(655.2)		
N (program years)	95		

Table A1: Appendix A1: TWFE Robustness (\$6.85/day)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
ln(Chinese Finance + 1)	0.248	0.241	0.290	0.143	0.036	−0.046
	(0.220)	(0.219)	(0.207)	(0.116)	(0.112)	(0.112)
ln(Western ODA + 1)		0.334	−1.830**	−1.515***	−2.562**	−2.706**
		(0.932)	(0.753)	(0.542)	(1.270)	(1.273)
N	945	945	900	877	577	469
Within R^2	0.006	0.008	0.034	0.174	0.242	0.300

Table A2: Appendix A2: Bartik IV Robustness (\$6.85/day)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
First-stage F (unchanged)	12.8	16.6	15.8	12.4	4.4†	5.0†
ln(Chinese Finance + 1) [IV]	6.986***	6.974***	6.405**	5.941**	9.801***	8.503***
	(2.554)	(2.538)	(2.457)	(2.363)	(2.640)	(2.572)
N	660	660	632	609	442	362

Table A3: Appendix A3: First-Difference and Pedroni Cointegration

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
Panel A: ΔPoverty at \$3.65/day (%)					
Δ ln(Chinese Finance + 1)	−0.028	−0.027	−0.022	−0.024	−0.025
	(0.027)	(0.026)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.028)
N	900	900	855	832	832
Panel B: ΔPoverty at \$6.85/day (%)					
Δ ln(Chinese Finance + 1)	−0.039*	−0.039*	−0.035	−0.038	−0.039
	(0.024)	(0.023)	(0.024)	(0.025)	(0.025)
N	900	900	855	832	832
Panel C: Pedroni (1999) Panel Cointegration					
\$3.65/day	$Z = -4.355$, $p = 0.000$ [Cointegrated ✓ — TWFE in levels valid]				
\$6.85/day	$Z = -4.191$, $p = 0.000$ [Cointegrated ✓ — TWFE in levels valid]				

Table A5: Appendix A5: Bartik IV Commodity Price Robustness (Exclusion Restriction Test)

	(1) Chinese only	(2) +Western ODA	(3) +Macro controls	(4) +Commodity × Resource	(5) +Oil × Resource	(6) +Both interactions
ln(Chinese Finance + 1) [IV]	—	—	4.359	4.420	4.367	4.419
			(2.941)	(3.193)	(3.171)	(3.186)
First-stage F	<1	<1	12.6	12.2	12.2	12.2
$\Delta\beta$ vs Col. (3)	—	—	—	+1.4%	+0.2%	+1.4%
N	660	632	609	609	609	609

Table A6: Appendix A6: Robustness to Alignment Endogeneity — Lagged UNGA Ideal Points

	Contemporaneous (t)	Lag 1 ($t-1$)	Lag 2 ($t-2$)	Lag 3 ($t-3$)
ln(Chinese Finance + 1)	−0.003	−0.074	−0.012	−0.008
	(0.112)	(0.106)	(0.148)	(0.146)
Alignment variable	Contemporaneous	Lagged 1yr	Lagged 2yr	Lagged 3yr
N	877	835	793	751

Table A7: Appendix A7: TWFE Baseline — SSA-Only Subsample (39 Countries)

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
ln(Chinese Finance + 1) [SSA]	0.490	0.031	0.098	−0.180	−0.103
	(0.348)	(0.161)	(0.158)	(0.130)	(0.111)
[Full sample β]	*[0.773**]*	*[0.427]*	*[0.532*]*	*[−0.003]*	*[0.012]*
Controls	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Alignment	No	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Macro controls	No	No	No	Yes	Yes
Polity	No	No	No	No	Yes
N (SSA)	819	819	776	753	593

METHODOLOGICAL COHERENCEIN SOCIAL RESEARCH:PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS, PARADIGMATIC ALIGNMENT, AND ETHICAL PRACTICE

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Abstract

Selecting an appropriate research methodology remains a significant challenge for emerging scholars, owing to limited engagement with philosophical and practical considerations that underpin methodological choice. This paper addresses a persistent gap in the literature, wherein existing methodological guidance tends either towards philosophical abstraction that novice researchers find difficult to operationalise, or towards procedural prescription that neglects the ontological and epistemological foundations from which methodological choices derive their coherence. Drawing on a critical synthesis of methodological literature, this paper offers an integrated accountof research paradigms, methodology, and ethicalpractice, structured to support principled and coherent methodological decision-making. The paper examinesthe ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning research inquiry before critically analysing key paradigms, includingpositivism, post-positivism, interpretivism, critical theory, and pragmatism, and their implications for quantitative, qualitative, and mixed-methods designs. It furtherexamines data collection and sampling strategies in relation to paradigmatic assumptions, evaluating the strengths and limitations inherent in each methodological tradition. Ethical considerations encompassing procedural ethics, micro-ethics, ethics of representation, and data security, are treated as integral to methodological decision-making rather than as peripheral obligations or an afterthought. The paper concludes by offering strategies for achieving methodological coherence and identifying common pitfalls, including methodological misalignment, tokenistic mixed- methods integration, and ethical oversight. By critically integrating philosophical, methodological, and ethical dimensions, this paper equips researchers with the conceptual grounding necessary to design studies that are methodologically coherent, ethically defensible, and capable of generating knowledge of genuine scholarly consequence.

Keywords: *Methodological coherence; Research paradigms; Philosophical foundations; Research ethics*

1.INTRODUCTION

Selecting an appropriate research methodology remains one of the most consequential yet consistently challenging decisions facing researchers, especially those at early stages of their scholarly development (Daniel et al., 2024).(Daniel et al., 2024). Such decisions fundamentally shape the direction, accuracy, and eventual contribution of any research study (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). However, many early-career researchers encounter difficulty navigating these choices, owing to limited exposure to the complex interrelationship between philosophical underpinnings, paradigmatic assumptions, researchquestions, and appropriate techniques (Paudel, 2024). When methodological decisions are poorly grounded, the consequences extend beyond inconclusive findings to compromised scholarly credibility and ethical vulnerability, thereby limiting the capacityto generate validand meaningful knowledge from research (Nuriman, 2024). Despite the existence of a substantial methodological literature, existing guidance tends either towards philosophical abstraction that novice researchers find difficult to operationalise, or towards procedural prescription that neglects the ontological and epistemological foundations from which methodological choices derive their coherence (Crotty, 1998; Omodan, 2024). This paper addresses this gap by offering a critically integrated account of research paradigms, methodology,and ethical practices, structured to support principled and coherent methodological decision-making.

This paper examines the underlying ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning allresearch inquiry (Hathcoat et al., 2019),specifically what is taken to exist in reality (ontology) and how knowledge of that reality may be generated (epistemology). These assumptions are not abstract philosophical concerns; they directlyinform the adoptionof specific researchparadigms, namely positivism, interpretivism, pragmatism, and critical theory (Paudel, 2024) which in turn underpin the choice of quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods designs (Omodan, 2024). Correspondingly, the selection of data collection tools (e.g., surveys, interviews, observation, document analysis) and analysis methodsmust remain consistent with the selectedmethodological approach to ensure rigor and credibility (Ahmed, 2024). Ethical principles including informed consent, confidentiality, minimisation of harm, and researcher integrity are intrinsic obligations that permeateevery phase of methodological decision-making and implementation (Alhabsi,

2024). This paper critically examines the relationships between these philosophical, paradigmatic, methodological, and ethical dimensions to equip researchers with the conceptual tools necessary to design studies that are methodologically coherent, ethically defensible, and capable of generating knowledge of genuine scholarly consequence.

2. **CONCEPTS**

The choice of research method is inescapably entwined with more fundamental philosophical beliefs about the nature of the world and how it may be accessed. These are the foundations on which all research is built, often operating implicitly, but exerting considerable influence over what to research, how to research it, and what would count as sufficient evidence (Crotty, 1998).

2.1 Ontology

Ontology poses the foundational question of what constitutes reality. It is concerned with the nature of existence and what the researcher presupposes to be real (Crotty, 1998; Hathcoat et al., 2019).Two broad ontological positions dominate research discourse:

Realism/Objectivism: holds that reality exists independently of human social construction, perception, or consciousness (Machado et al., 2025). There exists one objective reality to be uncovered by rigorous, unbiased inquiry (Stamenkovic, 2023). This position aligns closely with positivist and post-positivist paradigms.

Relativism/Subjectivism/Constructionism: holds that reality is neither singular nor objective. Instead, knowledge is constructed through the interplay of individual agency, perception, language, and social processes (Keller, 2019). Multiple realities exist, shaped by individuals' experiences and socio-cultural contexts (Kokko and Harjula, 2024). This position underlies interpretivist, constructivist, and critical paradigms.

2.2 Epistemology

Epistemology addresses the question of what constitutes knowledge, how it is generated, and what relationship existsbetween the researcher and that which is being studied(Crotty, 1998; Hathcoat et al., 2019). It is concerned, more precisely, with how knowledge of reality may be legitimately obtained and what criteria determine its validity. Objectivism:: holds that the researcher act as a

neutral, objective observer, uncovering objective realities without influencing the subject matter (Hiller, 2016). Knowledge is obtained through scientific measurement and observation (Liu et al., 2023).

Subjectivism/Constructionism: holds that the researcher is not a neutral observer but is inherently positioned within the research process(Iosifides, 2018). Knowledge (Iosifides, 2018). Knowledge is co-constructed between the researcher and participants and, subjectively created by the researcher based on their values, experiences, and location, influenced by there searcher's values, experiences, and positionality (Fitzsimmons et al., 2024). Accordingly, understanding the meanings that participants attach to their experiences is central to this epistemological position.

Research Paradigms: Paradigms are general frameworks, or "worldviews", or shared worldviews, that encompass closely related ontological, epistemological, and methodological assumptions (Paudel, 2024). For Kuhn (1962), paradigms constitute shared assumptions and conventions that define what counts as legitimate inquiry within a scientific community. Key paradigms within social science research include:

Positivism: Grounded in realism and objectivism, positivism holds that a single, objective reality exists, governed by universal laws systematic measurement, experimentation, hypothesis testing, and statistical analysis (Khanna, 2019). It prioritises prediction and control and positions the researcher as a detached and objective observer.

Post-Positivism: Recognises the fallibility of human measurement and observation. It retains the positivist commitment to an objective reality whilst acknowledging that knowledge is provisional, and that theory remains open to revision in light of new evidence(Tripathi et al., 2024). It employs adapted experimental and quantitative techniques, commonly incorporating triangulation to strengthen the credibility of findings (Dulal, 2025).

Interpretivism (Constructivism): Grounded in relativism and subjectivism, interpretivism holds that multiple, socially constructed realities exist (Van der Walt, 2020). t focuses on the subjective meaning, experience, and interpretation of persons or groups attach to their world(Acharya, 2025), with knowledge understood as emerging through interaction and dialogue. It typically employs qualitative strategies such as interviews, ethnography, and discourse analysis (Tanlaka & Aryal, 2025).

Critical Theory: holds that reality is constructed by historical, social, political, cultural, and economic power relations that privilege some and marginalise others (Bilgin, 2023). It seeks not only to understand the world but to problematise the power imbalances that structure it, with the explicit aim of advancing social justice and equity. It typically employsqualitative or participatory approaches, with an emphasis on reflexivity and advocacy in research (Kincheloe & McLaren, 2011; Carducci & Pasque, 2025).
Pragmatism: Prioritises the practical utility of research and the identification of workable solutions. It resists rigid alignment with either realist or relativist, or objectivist or subjectivist, extremes (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). Methodological choice is subordinate to the demands of the research question, with the criterion of what works in addressing the research problem guiding design decisions, most commonly favouring mixed-methods approaches. Truth, within this paradigm, is understood as contingent and instrumental (Timans et al., 2019).

2.3 Paradigms to Methodology

Paradigmatic assumptions directly inform methodological choices, with each paradigm orienting the researcher towards particular forms of inquiry:

Quantitative Research: It is most closely aligned with positivist and post-positivist paradigms. Quantitative research employs numeric data, statistical analysis, and standardised measures such as questionnaires and structured tests, seeking generalisability, prediction, and cause-and-effect determination (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Qualitative Research: It is most closely associated with interpretivist, constructivist, and critical paradigms. Qualitative research engages with non-numerical data, including words, images, and observations, throughinterpretive analysis and adaptive designssuch as case studies, ethnography, and grounded theory. It seeks rich understanding, meaningconstruction, and sensitivity to context and complexity (Aspers & Corte, 2019).

Mixed Methods Research: Most closely associated with pragmatism, though increasingly employed within transformative paradigmatic settings (Shan, 2022), mixed-methods research integrates quantitative and qualitative data, collected either concurrently or sequentially, to produce a more comprehensive account than either approach yields independently. Sequential, concurrent, or embedded designsmay be adopted (Creswell & Plano Clark,2023). Across all three methodological traditions, a principled understanding of ontology, epistemology, and paradigmatic assumptions is essential to making informed, justifiable, and effective research design choices.

2.4 Ethics as Integral

Ethical concernsare not an afterthought but are deeplyembedded within methodological decisions from inception of the study through to publication (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004; Mena & Hilhorst, 2022). The literature identifies several distinct dimensions of research ethics:
Procedural Ethics: encompasses formal institutional ethical approval, alongside the securing of informed consent and the assurance of participant confidentiality (Abay et al., 2016).

Ethics in Practice (Micro-ethics): concerns the resolution of ethical dilemmas as they arise in the field, including navigating power relations, maintaining cultural sensitivity, safeguarding vulnerable participants, and upholding researcher integrity (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Critical and participatory paradigms are notably attentive to issues of power, representation, and reciprocity (Mwaanga & Adeosun, 2015).

Ethics of Representation: involves criticalreflectionon how participants' words and lives are both represented throughout the researchprocess and in final publishedaccounts (Spencer et al., 2020).

Data Securityand Management: concernsthe responsible handlingand secure storageof data, with particular attention to sensitive personal information (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

2.5 Challenges and Criticisms

Several significant persist within the methodological literature. Novice researchers oftenencounter difficulty grasping the abstract nature of philosophical and paradigmatic reasoning, a challenge compoundedby limited methodological mentorship in many disciplinary contexts(Mena &

Hilhorst, 2022). Disciplinary traditions may further constrain methodological repertoires, discouraging researchers from engaging with approaches outside established norms A further concern is the continued hegemony of Western paradigms, which risks marginalising indigenous and non-Western epistemologies and knowledge systems (Mwaanga & Adeosun, 2015). Alongside this, longstanding debates over the relative rigour and value of qualitative versus quantitative approaches persist, reflecting deeperepistemological tensions that remain unresolved in the literature (Cypress, 2017). At the level of practice, achieving genuine methodological integration, particularly within mixed-methods designs, and meeting the considerable resource demands such integration entails, remain persistent challenges (Amadi, 2023).

3. Critical discussion on philosophical assumptions

Selecting an appropriate methodology is one of the most consequential decisions in any research study, particularly for novice researchers navigating complex philosophical terrain for the first time. At the foundation of methodological choicelie ontological and epistemological assumptions, that is, what reality is held to be (ontology) and how knowledge of that reality may be obtained (epistemology). Ontologically, positivism holds that a single, objective reality exists independently of the researcher and is accessible through systematic measurement, whilst interpretivism posits the existence of multiple, socially constructed realities. Pragmatism, by contrast, prioritises the practical utility of research and supports the integration of methods most appropriate to the research problem. This philosophical diversity emphasises the critical importance of aligning methodological choices with one's foundational beliefs about reality and knowledge, as well as with the specific objectives of the study (Maxwell, 2012; Crotty, 1998).

Positivist paradigms are most closely aligned with quantitative research, in which hypotheses are subjected to statistical testing.Creswell & Creswell(2014) argue that positivist designsnecessitate operational definitions and measurable variables, and that data collection methods including surveys and systematic experiments produce replicable, standardised observations. Such methods are commonly employed across disciplines such as psychology and epidemiology, where controlled measurement and hypothesis testing produce generalisable results. In public health research, for instance, large-scale surveysusing validated questionnaires enable researchers to draw inferences about prevalence rates and population-level correlations, an approach characteristic of positivist epistemology (Breilh, 2021).

Interpretivist paradigms, by contrast, embrace context-dependent meaning and treat subjectivity as data rather than a source of bias (Maxwell, 2012). Qualitative approaches such as interviews, focus groups, ethnography, and participant observation are more closelyaligned with interpretivist assumptions. Guba and Lincoln (1994) note that such approaches prioritise trustworthiness over objectivity, and that researcher reflexivity is central to the interpretive process. In education research, for instance, ethnographies of classroom social organisation enable researchers to examine teachers' and students' lived experiences, illuminating complex social processes that numerical methods alone cannot adequately capture (Tsui, 2023).

Pragmatism occupies an adaptable middleground, eschewing rigid allegiance to either positivism or interpretivism. As Patton (2002) argues, pragmatist researchers select methods based on their utility in addressing the research problem, an orientation that commonly leads to mixed-methods designs capableof capturing both breadth and depth, usingquantitative data to reveal patternsand qualitative data to explore meaning and context. In health services research, for instance, patient satisfaction may be measured quantitatively through surveys, whilst participants may also be interviewed qualitatively to uncover the reasoning behind their perceptions, thereby yielding a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon (Shan et al., 2016).

Paradigmatic consistency is equally important in the selection of data collection methods. Structured instruments such as questionnaires with Likert scales or standardised tests are well suited to positivist quantitative research, enabling statistical analysis and hypothesis testing (Rahi, 2017). Samplingstrategies within this tradition, includingrandom sampling and stratification, are designed to maximise generalisability. Interpretivist qualitative research, by contrast, typically employs purposive or theoretical sampling, selecting participants best positioned to provide rich, detailed accounts. Methods such as semi-structured interviews afford depth and flexibility, enabling participants to articulate their perspectives freely, whilst observational approaches capture phenomena as they unfold in situ (Iyamu, 2018).

Mixed-methods designs integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches to produceaccounts that neither tradition could yield independently. Explanatory sequential designsbegin with quantitative data collection and analysis before moving to qualitative investigation to illuminate the findings; exploratory sequential designs do the reverse (Toyon, 2021). Creswell and Plano Clark (2023) characterise these approaches as synergistic, with quantitative data yielding broad patterns and qualitative data illuminating their meaning. Concurrent mixed-methods designs collectboth forms of data simultaneously, enabling cross-validation of findings.

Each methodological tradition carries inherent strengths and limitations. Quantitative strategies offer precision, economies of scale, and the potential for generalisability, but may sacrifice depth and contextual richness, and risk overlooking meanings, motives, and processes. Qualitative strategies yield rich understanding, contextual sensitivity, and adaptability, but at the cost of generalisability and replicability. Mixed-methods strategies seek to integrate these respective strengths, though at the cost of greater complexity in design, implementation, analysis, and the integration of findings (Almeida, 2018).

Anchoring research questions to appropriate methodological frameworks is a fundamentally reflective process. The articulation of a clear research problem and question provides the foundation for all subsequent methodological decisions. Research questions may concern prevalence (quantitative), lived experience (qualitative), or both, and a useful strategy for novice researchers is to map each question explicitly onto its methodological implications. Questions concerning how or why something occurs are typicallybest addressed throughqualitative inquiry, whilst thoseasking how much or how often are more suitedto quantitative measurement. Mixed- methods designs must maintain internal coherence, with quantitative and qualitative components informing one another and culminating in integrated interpretation (Hitchcock & Onwuegbuzie, 2022).

Common methodological errors include mismatches between research questions and methods, such as employing surveys to addressin-depth experiential questions, or underestimating the time and resource demands of qualitative or mixed-methods studies.Novice researchers are sometimes steered towards quantitative methods on the assumption that they are more rigorousor publishable; however, without appropriate philosophical and practical grounding, such direction constitutes a methodological mismatch. Researchers must also be alert to the risk of tokenistic mixed methods, wherein a qualitative component is appended without substantive integration, or selective reporting that privileges one form of findings over another (Harrison et al., 2020).

Formal instruction and mentorship are essential to researchers' methodological development. Engagement with philosophical foundations, methodological design,and ethical practice,whether through workshops, collaborative research with experienced scholars, or reflective and pilot work, supports the development of conceptual rigour and practical competence. In summary, sound methodological practice requires the integration of philosophical awareness, methodological competence, ethical sensitivity, and strategic alignment with research objectives. Positivist quantitative methods excel in measurement and generalisation; interpretivist qualitative methods in meaning-making and contextual understanding; pragmatist mixed-methods approaches integrate both for a more comprehensive account. Data collection strategies and sampling procedures must be selected to ensure methodological congruence, ethical integrity is non- negotiable across all paradigmatic traditions, and novice researchers are best supported through mentorship, reflective practice, and experiential learning.

Guarding against methodological misalignment, superficial integration, and ethical compromise produces research that advances knowledge with rigour, relevance, and integrity.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided researchers with conceptual grounding and practical guidanceto support informed methodological decision-making. By engagingcritically with philosophical foundations, aligning methods with research questions, and upholding ethical obligations, researchers can produce work that is rigorous, credible, contextually relevant, and ethically defensible.. Future work might examine how methodological decision-making is experienced in practice by novice researchers across diverse disciplinary and cultural contexts, generating empirical insights that could strengthen the guidance frameworks this paper has sought to advance.

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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN DYNAMIC CAPABILITIES, PROACTIVE ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGY AND SME PERFORMANCE IN NIGERIA.

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Introduction

Research Aim and questions

The main objective of the study is to explore the relationship between dynamic capabilities and the existence and development of proactive environmental strategy in developing economy SMEs. Specifically, the research project will address the following questions:

1. To what extent is there a relationship between dynamic capability and proactive environmental strategy in developing economy SMEs?
2. To what extent can proactive environmental strategy be positioned as a micro-foundation of dynamic capabilities?
3. To what extent does the role of trade-offs affect SMEs pursuing dynamic capability and proactive environmental strategy?

Based on the above, the chapter discusses the research philosophy underlying this study, describe the research design, discuss the Population and Sample size determination, describe the questionnaire development and constructs operationalisation process and describe the data analysis technique This chapter presented a diagrammatical illustration that clearly captures the entire research methodology for this study.

Figure 1 below summarizes the methodological structure of this study.

3.2 Research philosophy

To develop a robust knowledge of any research design in the field of social sciences, it is important to provide an in-depth understanding of the philosophical assumptions that underpins the research (Blaikie, 2007; Saunders, 2011). These philosophical assumptions provide the foundational basis upon which a researcher's view of the knowledge and assumption regarding appropriate research methods and approaches is anchored upon (Morgan, 2014).

This research has identified "positivism" as the underlying assumption upon which this research is built. Positivism adopts a philosophical stance stating that knowledge is only valid and generalizable if it is objectively derived from scientific methods through direct experience. This supports the notion of Mukhles and Al-Ababneh (2020) which assume that "Scientific knowledge is both accurate and certain, which represents the confidence in science (p.78)".

3.2.1 Why Positivism?

According to Creswell (1994), the positivism research philosophy is suitable for quantitative research. Quantitative research methodology is grounded on positivism paradigm and it focused on measuring social phenomena through an empirical process of collecting and analyzing numerical data (Al-Ababneh, 2020). Studying the relationship between proactive environmental strategy, dynamic capabilities, and SME performance requires a positivism approach since it involves an empirical investigation which aim to predict or confirm the behavioural patterns of these variables. To generalize the study findings, the approach needs to align with the positivism paradigm whose focus is on investigating and confirming patterns that involve testing hypotheses. According to Maksimovic and Evtimov (2023, p.211) "positivism philosophy is based on the principle of verification" and this verification can only be confirmed empirically. Therefore, the empirical focus of this study makes it employ such a positivism perspective, based on existing studies that investigated the cause-effect relationship between dynamic capabilities and proactive environmental strategy on firm performance.

3.3 Research design

Research design is a fundamental part of the research process that provides a road map on the various research steps, data type and methods required in addressing the research questions (Bhattacherjee, 2012. However, the choice of research design adopted for this study is influenced by the nature of the research questions and research philosophy underpinning the study. Therefore, a quantitative, explanatory and cross-sectional research design is considered appropriate for this study.

Quantitative research design as adopted for this study will focus on using descriptive and inferential statistics to analysis the variables of study. Using a quantitative method allows the study to assess the strength and significance effect of these relationships. The quantitative approach offers a higher degree of generalizability of proactive environmental strategy and dynamic capabilities findings to a broader population of SMEs.
Additionally, **explanatory research design** becomes appropriate since the study has adopted a quantitative approach which is anchored on cause-effect relationship involving the testing of hypotheses. Sekaran (2003) argue that hypotheses testing is conducted to explain the underlying relationship among variables and predict outcomes among group of variables in an explanatory study.

Lastly, because the study involves gathering data collection process from a population at specific time a cross-sectional design is deemed appropriate (Wang & Cheng, 2020).

3.4 Population and Sample size determination

The population consists of business owners/managers of registered Micro, Small and Medium enterprises (MSMEs) operators in Nigeria. According to the PWC survey report (2024), there are 39 million registered MSMEs in Nigeria. Among the population, the manufacturing sector has been identified as an area of focus. This is because it is regarded as the productive hub of the economy accounting for significant contribution to GDP and employment opportunities (Central Bank of Nigeria, nd) and features in top three sectors in Nigeria with highest GDP contribution of 14.5% (Statista, 2023).

In determining the sample size for the study, the researcher adopted the 200 minimum sample size required for conducting structural equation model as supported by Niels and Blunch (2013) arguing that a most suitable sample size for structural equation modelling (SEM) should be minimum of 100 for a simple model, and 200 – 300 for a complex model.

A stratified random sampling technique was used to select subjects. With the aid of stratified random sampling technique, the population of interest is divided into groups (strata) giving the chance to randomly select subjects within each group, ensuring that all groups are represented. To ensure a sufficient representation of subjects and higher response rate, the survey instrument randomly distributed electronically across the six (6) geopolitical zone in Nigeria which includes North-West, North-East, North-Central, South-West, South-East and South-South.

3.5 Questionnaire development and constructs operationalisation

3.5.1 Scale development

It is important to show transparency when adapting to a measurement scale. Consistent with this view, this study showed the scale adaptation process using three basic steps.
The **first step** entails where items that measure a scale are identified based on theoretical support which entails an extensive review of related literature in combination with pre-existing scales.

The **second step** in the scale adaptation process for this study involves a theoretical analysis where content validity of the new scale was assessed to ensure that the items reflect the constructs that have been measured. To establish content validity, the researcher seeks experts' opinions regarding how the items are operationalized as well as the opinions of the target population (SME managers).

The last stage in the scale adaptation process for this study focuses on the pre-test and assessment of the reliability of the scale. Reliability was tested to confirm the internal consistency of the adapted scale, and more details were provided in the analysis chapter.

Furthermore, in refining the items to ensure its suitability within the SMEs Nigeria economies, contextual factors of firm size, time constraints for respondents, digital technology usage, socioeconomic status, environmental factors and educational/background experiences were taken into consideration. Selected SMEs managers provided insights to limitations and possible outcomes that could hinder the administration of the questionaries. The input of these industry experts contributed to the refinement of the questionnaires.

Based on the above, this study used **eight items** to capture proactive environmental strategy from Sharma and Vredenburg (1998). Dynamic capabilities (12 itemss) and environmental performance (5 items) was measured using scales adapted from Kump et al (2019) and Jahjadi et al (2023). Responses to above items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale response format ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree).

Lastly, **financial performance** was captured using self-developed continuous, manager-reported indicators. The study’s objective measurement choice was to operationalize financial performance using indicators that are context appropriate rather than relying on an already existing scale. This rationale is further justified on the claim of scholars like Jordan et al. (2024) who argue that one of the methods of increasing the relevance of any research, especially within a positivist's philosophical assumption, is to include objective measures. Bjorkman & Budhwar (2007) as cited by Singh et al (2016) further argues that objective measures of firm performance are more robust when compared with subjective measures because managers may not be willing to acknowledge any shortcomings but rather overstate their performance level. And as such, the objective measures of collecting financial data in continuous form helped reduce the actions of managers overstating their performance.

The continuous data were later transformed to reduce extreme values which are common with self-reported data in continuous terms (Hu & Gim, 2025). To ensure methodological consistency of scale, the financial continuous data was harmonized to be consistent with other variables of the study. Ensuring consistency in the 7-point Likert scale is paramount in other to ensure little or no bias and similar results to latent continuous variables, which according to Sullivian & Artino (2023) help support measurement comparability in line with best practice for validating constructs. A total of 4 items were used in measuring financial performance (ranging from provide an estimate of your annual revenue for the last financial year (in Naira), Please estimate the percentage change in your annual revenue in the last year etc) to understand the financial performance of these firms.

Control variables

In consistent with previous literatures (Adomako et et., 2020; Arend, 2014; Asumah et al., 2024) this study accounted for control variable using firm size (indicating the number of employees) and age (indicating the years of operation) which are used as determinant factors that affect the hypothesised relationship. Details of the control variable analysis is found in the analysis chapter.

Method of data collection

Questionnaire was administered online using the University of Huddersfield Qualtrics website – an online platform designed to administer questionnaires to respondents in carrying out research activities. One of the most effective way Nigerian SMEs connect to the public is via the internet (Moniepoint MFB, 2023). Due to the large sample size across the geopolitical zones in Nigeria, online survey is appropriate as compared to paper-based survey. This is because 58% of Nigeria businesses operates in online marketplaces (Statista.com). Additionally, online survey is considered a more valued tool of obtaining information from large respondents across different parts of a country or globally at low cost (Evans & Mathur, 2005). The research instrument was distributed to Nigeria SMEs managers/owners using electronic mail and Linkedln personalized messages. The contacts of business owners/managers were gotten by subscribing online to data base which are the “verified business directory and search portal” in Nigeria and “Connect Nigeria”. In addition to these databases, LinkedIn searches of business owners/managers in Nigeria were conducted to obtain more contacts.

3.7 Method of analysis

The data obtained from the survey was be analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptives statistics was employed to determine the percentage of responses while Structural Equation Modelling (SEM) was used to analyse the hypotheses. SEM is an extension of traditional regression analysis and analysis of variance (ANOVA) used in management research to explain multiple statistical relationships simultaneously through visualization and model validation (Dash & Paul, 2021). It is simply defined as the simultaneous combination of factor analysis and multiple regression analysis (Haenlein & Kaplan, 2004; Sarstedt et al., 2017). Since the research objective of this study is focus on theory testing and confirmation - exploring the relationship between dynamic capabilities and the existence and development of proactive environmental strategy in developing economy SMEs, a covariance-based technique is suitable unlike a variance based where the aim is for theory development.

3.7.1 Tool of analysis

SPSS Amos (Analysis of Moment Structures) was used to perform the analysis where specific commands was given to the software after careful coding and data cleansing process is performed.

3.8 Pre-test

In accordance with good ethical research practice, a pilot study was conducted where the questionnaire was administered to 20 SMEs owners/managers as contained in the sample frame for this research. About 15 respondents were retrieved from the pilot study and subjected to reliability test. Cronbach Alpha for all constructs were above 0.70, all within the acceptable ranges confirming that the questionnaire measures what is it expected to measure. After this process, the questionnaire was distributed to the Nigeria SME owners/managers, and details are given in the next section below.

5.1 Response rate

A total of 1,884 contacts were generated through the various sources highlighted in the methodology chapter. Despite these challenges, the study generated a response of 366. At first point in examining the data, 25 incomplete responses were spotted. As a wide practice in statistical analysis, such responses were deleted from the data during the data cleaning process. After deleting the 25 incomplete responses, the total number of firms amounted to 311, with a response rate of 16.51%. Based on this response rate, the descriptive statistics were examined. The descriptive demographic analysis of the firm was examined, and the result is shown below;

Summary of data collection activities

Description	Response Rate
Number of SMEs contacted	1884
Numbers of failed emails	38
Number of responses	336
Number of incomplete/unengaged responses	25
Number of usable responses	311

4.3 Data Quality Assurance

4.3.1 Assessing Data Entry and Outliers

In assessing data for statistical analysis, it is suggested to test for outliers because of their ability to create potential bias of results (Marczk et al., 2005) and the tendency to pull the mean away from the median (Blaikie, 2003). Literature suggests that outliers are of two categories: univariate and multivariate outliers. While univariate outliers occur within a single variable, multivariate on the other hand occurs within a combination of variables (Tabachnick et al. 2001). Due to the large sample size, outliers are likely to influence the datasets, but careful consideration was employed to assess the identified outliers using demographic statistics on a case-by-case basis to understand the reasons for these outlier cases before deleting cases. Additionally, careful considering was employed in compliance with Small and Medium Development Agency of Nigeria (SMEDAN) classification of SMEs. Therefore, firms whose financial revenue were in billions were removed as this does not fall under the SMEDAN classification of SMEs. This entire process yielded 9 extreme outlier cases/unusual data which were removed before subjecting the data to further analysis. It is worthy to note that the exclusion of these cases may not limit the findings generalisability because the cases are few and insignificant when compared with the sample size (Hair et al., 1998). After checking for unusual data, 9 cases were excluded resulting to a total of 302 valid cases which was subjected to further analysis. After the data assessment was conducted, the final sample used in this research was 302 responses. Based on the sample size rule of thumb recommendation by Blunch, which requires a minimum of 200 sample size, the sample size for this study is considered sufficient to generate a generalized finding. The researcher proceeded to compute the composite variables for all constructs; sensing, seizing and transforming capabilities, proactive environmental performance, environmental sustainability performance and financial performance. The result of their Table 2:

Test for skewness, kurtosis and Cronbach alpha reliability

Measurement Variables	Mean	SD	Skewness	Kurtosis	Cronbach Alpha	Nos of Items	Min	Max
Seizing Capabilities	4.12	1.443	-.001	-.821	.794	5	1	7
Sensing Capabilities	4.14	1.346	-.034	-.805	.798	4	1	7
Transforming Capabilities	4.30	1.270	-.072	-.687	.825	7	1	7
Financial Performance	3.82	1.454	.115	-1.062	.737	3	1	7
Environmental Sustainability Performance	4.47	1.168	.149	-.395	.728	5	1	7
Proactive Environmental Strategy	3.66	1.343	.978	-.164	.868	8	1	7

Table 3: Descriptive statistics and correlation values

Measurement Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
(1) Seizing Capabilities	4.12	1.443	1					
(2) Sensing Capabilities	4.14	1.346	.717**					
(3) Transforming Capabilities	4.30	1.270	.784**	701**				
(4) Environmental Sustainability Performance	4.47	1.168	.582**	.529**	.570**			
(5) Proactive Environmental Strategy	3.66	1.343	.635**	.513**	.631**	.686**		
(6) Financial Performance	3.82	1.454	.189**	.268**	.236**	.014	-.132*	

respective mean values and standard deviation is shown in **Table 3.**

4.3.2 Normality Assessment

One common way to check that data is normally distributed across a sample is to conduct a normality assessment test. In order not to assume the normality of the data, normality assessment was conducted. Non-normality distributed data has the capacity to distort variable relationships, presents inaccurate predictions, and invalid inferential findings. To mitigate the effect of non-normality, scholars have recommended testing the normality of the data to minimize measurement error and detrimental effects (Finney & Distefano, 2006). Two ways to assess the normality of data are to test for skewness and Kurtosis (Kline, 2011). Therefore, a normality test was conducted to assess the skewness and kurtosis using SPSS version 21.

Skewness measures the symmetry of a distribution around the mean to determine whether there are unusual responses within the data set that are extremely distributed towards one side of the scale (Marczyk et al, 2005). A situation where data is largely concentrated on one end of the scale is an indication that the data is not normally distributed. While no absolute standards exist for assessing skewness and kurtosis, an acceptable range of skewness as proposed by Lewis-Beck et al. (2003) ranges from −2 to +2. The result of the skewness test shows that all constructs did not exceed -2 and 2 with the highest values of 0.978 (proactive environmental strategy) and the lowest value of −0.001 (seizing capabilities). The table 3 below confirms the evidence of normality of the study data as skewness values fall within the threshold.

Kurtosis measures the extent to which data is flat or peaked in relation to a normal distribution (Marczyk et al, 2005). It is worth noting that while no absolute standards exist for assessing kurtosis, an acceptable range as proposed by Kline (2008) should be between −3 to +3. The result of the test values in Table 2 below confirms the evidence of non-normality of the study data as kurtosis values fall within the threshold. Additionally, the Cronbach alpha for the constructs confirms the reliability of all constructs with 0.728 as lowest and 0.868 as highest values, satisfying the acceptable threshold as shown in table 2. While the correlation values and descriptive statistics is shown in table 3 below.

Common Method Bias

In accounting for common method bias (CMB), the Harman's one-factor test was used. Further steps were taken to prevent bias estimates by conducting Harman's one-factor test where the result variance were examined by fitting all study constructs into an unrotated principal component factor analysis as suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003). As a rule of thumb, a single factor that accounts for more than 50% shows the potential presence of CMB (Podsakoff et al., 2003). However, the result of the test obtained after entering the research constructs into an unrotated principal components factor analysis shows that the total variance explained (TVE) accounts for approximately 36% indicating that CMB was not an issue in the data set.

Multicollinearity test

Multicollinearity refers to the extent to which independent variables are intercorrelated. Pallant (2013) argue that the presence of multicollinearity is detected when correlation values among independent variables is 0.9 and above. Bollen and Lennox (1991) further argue that the presence of multicollinearity causes instability in the coefficient estimates, thereby jeopardizing the study findings and result reliability. A common method to test for multicollinearity is through the variance inflation factor (VIF). As suggested by O'brien (2007) a multicollinearity problem occurs if VIF values are above 5, this is because the VIF quantifies how much variance is inflated in the coefficient estimate. To ensure the data is free of multicollinearity, a multicollinearity test was conducted using SPSS statistical tool. The results obtained from the dataset depicts that the VIF values of all constructs ranges between 1.815 and 3.295, which are within the recommended threshold. This clearly suggests the absence of multicollinearity within the data and as such, the data is fit to produce accurate predictions of the model.

Validity and Reliability

To assess convergent validity and discriminant validity, an average variance extracted (AVE) from the indicators is often used and a recommended threshold of an AVE greater than or equal to 0.50 (AVE ⩾ 0.50) confirms convergent validity (Nikkhah et al., 2018) while a maximum shared variance (MSV) squared less than AVE confirms discriminant validity (Hair et al., 2018). To demonstrate convergent validity and discriminant validity, standardized regression weight (factor loadings) and correlation values obtained from CFA results were computed in excel using the formula below;

$$AVE = \frac{\sum \lambda_i^2}{\sum \lambda_i^2 + \sum \theta_i}$$

Where;

λ_i = standardized factor loading, θ_i = error variance for each indicator, N = number of items

The result reveals that all AVE values (PES=0.683, ESP = 0.630, FP = 0.504, DCs = 0.805) are above 0.50 (AVE ⩾ 0.50) confirming convergent validity. Additionally, all AVE values for each construct are greater than their respective MSV values (PES = 0.533, ESP = 0.585, FP = 0.112, DCs = 0.585 indicating MSV < AVE) confirming discriminant validity as shown in the table 5 below.

Table 5: Composite reliabilities (CR), Average Variance Extracted (AVE) and Maximum Shared Variance (MSV)

Measurement Variables	AVE	MSV	CR
Dynamic Capabilities	0.809	0.594	0.894
Financial Performance	0.534	0.100	0.767
Environmental Sustainability Performance	0.623	0.594	0.832
Proactive Environmental Strategy	0.661	0.563	0.906

The next step is the analysis chapter which is not included in this submission because the aim of this submission is to show the methodological process of my PhD thesis.

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LEADING AT THE INTERSECTION: RE-THEORISING THE LEADERSHIP PROFILES OF BLACK WOMEN IN SENIOR MANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA'S BANKING SECTOR

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Abstract

The Nigerian banking sector has seen a marked rise in women's representation at the senior leadership level, moving from one female bank chief executive in 2019 to nine by 2025, driven largely by Central Bank of Nigeria diversity mandates. Yet numerical gains say little about how these women lead, earn trust, and are perceived once in post. This conceptual paper repositions intersectionality theory, developed around race in white-majority contexts, toward dynamics that matter in a Black-majority, post-colonial setting: ethnicity, religion, attractiveness, and education. Drawing on secondary data, biographical profiles, and published interviews with senior Nigerian women bank executives, the paper develops recurring leadership-trait themes, including institutional stewardship, relational trust, collective mentorship, internally earned credibility, dual local/global credentialing, and a double-edged relationship with appearance, and examines how these intersect to shape perceived trustworthiness. The paper closes with a research agenda for extending management theory to account for these dynamics in African corporate settings.

Keywords: *Female leadership, Intersectionality theory, Nigerian banking sector, Perceived trustworthiness, Diversity*

Introduction

Existing research on the underrepresentation of Black women in senior roles has tended to focus on the barriers that keep women out of leadership: the glass ceiling, lack of mentoring, and unsupportive institutional cultures (Kalaitzi, Czabanowska, Fowler-Davis, & Brand, 2017). This framing, while important, leaves a gap in the required factors once representation begins to improve. The Nigerian banking sector offers a useful site to examine that gap. Following a 2012 CBN circular mandating diversity targets, the proportion of women on bank boards rose from 18% in 2018 to 25% by 2022 (Balogun, 2024), and by 2025, women made up roughly 35% of leadership roles across the sector overall, the highest proportion of any industry in the country (Akingbohungbe & Akpakpan, 2026). The number of women occupying chief executive roles across Nigeria's major banks rose from one in 2019 to as many as eleven by early 2024, settling at nine by 2025 (Akingbohungbe & Akpakpan, 2026).

This shift raises a different set of questions than those typically asked in the representation literature. Rather than asking why Black women are absent from leadership, this paper asks: once present, what leadership traits do these women project, what makes colleagues, regulators and the market trust them, and how do their intersecting identities, gender, ethnicity, religion, education and physical appearance, shape both the traits they display and how those traits are interpreted? This question matters for marketing and management theory because theorisation that fails to account for the Black woman's intersecting positionality continues to erase her story even while celebrating her presence (Sobande, 2019). To ground the discussion empirically, the paper draws on secondary data, including regulatory documents, sector reports, biographical profiles and published interviews with senior women executives, before turning to its theoretical implications.

Secondary Data: The Shape of Representation Gains

Three bodies of secondary data are useful here. The first is regulatory: the CBN's 2012 circular on the "Implementation of Sustainable Banking Principles by Banks, Discount Houses and Development Finance Institutions in Nigeria" mandated a minimum of 30% female board representation and 40% female representation in senior management across Nigerian banks (Level One Project, 2025). The then CBN Governor, Sanusi Lamido Sanusi, framed the policy explicitly as an attempt to break the glass ceiling blocking women's advancement, with compliant banks positioned to gain preferential access to Development Finance Institution funding (Daily Trust, 2021). No equivalent mandate exists for adjacent financial sub-sectors such as pensions or insurance, which have seen comparatively little movement in female leadership (Level One Project, 2025), a contrast that is itself instructive: it suggests representation gains in banking are substantially attributable to regulatory pressure rather than organic cultural change alone.

The second is sector-level performance and headcount data. A Gender Diversity in Corporate Leadership report by Agusto Consulting, a subsidiary of the pan-African credit rating agency Agusto & Co, found that average female board representation among Nigeria's top 25 listed companies by market capitalisation rose from 18% in 2018 to a then-record 25% by the end of 2022, with the report's authors cautioning that this threshold was "largely achieved on the back of the push from companies that can be defined as being progressive on the diversity agenda" rather than sector-wide change (Okomu Nigeria, 2023; Balogun, 2024), while more recent figures put female representation in banking leadership at approximately 35% by 2025, the highest of any sector tracked (Akingbohungbe & Akpakpan, 2026). Women already constitute close to 60% of the sector's overall workforce (Olatunji, 2025). The number of female bank CEOs is more volatile than the board-level figures: from one in 2019 to roughly eight by March 2024 (Balogun, 2024), and nine by 2025 (Akingbohungbe & Akpakpan, 2026), with an acting appointment briefly added following the sudden death of a male chief executive before the role was filled permanently by a man (Balogun, 2024). This pattern, gains at board and senior-management levels proving more durable than gains at the single, highly visible CEO level is itself worth theorising: it is consistent with the glass cliff literature's observation that the most visible leadership positions remain the most contested and the least secure for women.

The third is biographical and interview-based: published profiles and statements from individual women who have reached chief executive or group managing director level in Nigerian banks. These provide a starting point for examining how intersecting identities feature in the public narration of women's leadership in this sector, and how these women themselves describe what builds trust in their leadership.

Table 1: Profiles of Selected Senior Women Executives in Nigerian Banking (2015–2025)

Executive	Bank / Role	Appointed	Background
Adaora Umeoji	Zenith Bank, Group MD/CEO	Jun 2024	First woman to lead Zenith since its founding 34 years earlier; joined as an NYSC corps member and rose through the ranks over nearly 30 years, 26 of them at Zenith; Deputy MD from 2016; Igbo origin; degrees in sociology, accounting and law (first-class honours), plus a doctorate; executive education at Harvard, Wharton, MIT Sloan and Columbia.
Yetunde Bolanle Oni	Union Bank, MD/CEO	Jan 2024	Over 25 years' banking experience; previously the first female MD/CEO at Standard Chartered Bank Sierra Leone; Yoruba origin; degree from the University of Ibadan, MBA from Bangor University, executive training at Oxford.
Nneka Onyeali-Ikpe	Fidelity Bank, MD/CEO	Jan 2021	First woman to hold the CEO position since the bank's founding in 1988; around 30 years' experience; Igbo origin, educated at a Federal Government Girls' College; law degree from King's College London; executive education at Harvard, Wharton and Oxford's Said Business School.
Yemisi Edun	First City Monument Bank, MD/CEO	May 2021	First female chief executive of the bank; nearly 35 years' experience; previously Executive Director/CFO; Yoruba origin; chemistry graduate of the University of Ife with a master's in international accounting and finance from Liverpool.
Bukola Smith	FSDH Merchant Bank, MD/CEO	Apr 2021	29 years' progressive banking experience; previously Executive Director, Business Development at First City Monument Bank; built FCMB's SME-focused team from fifth to first position industry-wide within three years.
Halima Buba	SunTrust Bank, MD/CEO	Jan 2020	Over 20 years' experience across private and public sectors; co-founder of the TAJ consortium; sits on the board of the Nigeria Sovereign Investment Authority; hails from Adamawa State in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north-east, contrasting with the South-Western/South-Eastern, predominantly Christian origins of several peers.
Tomi Somefun	Unity Bank, MD/CEO	Aug 2015	Among the earliest of the current generation of female bank CEOs, leading since 2015; of Yoruba origin; fellow of the Institute of Chartered Accountants of Nigeria and the Chartered Institute of Bankers of Nigeria.
Bolaji Agbede	Access Holdings, Acting Group CEO	February 2024 – August 2025	Nearly 30 years' HR and business-support experience; stepped in as the firm's most senior executive following the sudden death of Herbert Wigwe; an explicitly temporary, CBN-approved succession appointment, later succeeded by a male permanent CEO.

Sources: compiled from Businessday NG (2024, 2025, 2026), Legit.ng (2024, 2026), THISDAY Live (2025, 2026), TheCable (2026), Punch (2026) and Technext (2026).

Several patterns emerge from this secondary data. Most of these women followed long internal-promotion pathways of twenty-five to thirty years, rather than lateral hires into the top role, a pattern consistent with the 'grooming leaders from within' succession language used by Zenith Bank in announcing Umeoji's appointment. Several combined Nigerian first degrees (often in sciences or social sciences rather than business) with international postgraduate qualifications or executive education at institutions such as Oxford, Harvard, Columbia, Wharton and MIT Sloan, suggesting that credentialing through both local and Western institutions functions as a recurring legitimation strategy. Regional and religious diversity is also visible: Halima Buba's roots in Adamawa State, in Nigeria's predominantly Muslim north-east, contrast with the predominantly Christian South-Western (Yoruba) or South-Eastern (Igbo) origins of most of her peers, echoing the federal character principle that formally governs ethnic and regional balance in Nigerian public appointments, even though no equivalent formal mandate governs private-sector bank boards. Finally, the Bolaji Agbede case illustrates the glass cliff dynamic directly: her appointment followed an unplanned crisis (the sudden death of the substantive CEO), was explicitly temporary, and was ultimately not converted into a permanent appointment, a sequence that fits a pattern documented in Western glass-cliff literature but rarely examined in African corporate settings.

Leadership Trait Themes from Public Profiles and Interviews

Beyond biographical data, published interviews and profile pieces on these executives, particularly Adaora Umeoji and Nneka Onyeali-Ikpe, offer richer material on how leadership trust is narrated in this context. Reading across these sources reveals six recurring themes, summarised in Table 2 below.

Table 2: Leadership Trait Themes in Public Narration of Senior Women Bank Executives

Theme	**Illustrative Public Narration**	**Theoretical Resonance**
Institutional integrity and disciplined stewardship	Umeoji's leadership is described as 'deliberate, disciplined, and anchored on institutional integrity', and she does not speak of leadership as conquest or arrival but as 'responsibility, earned gradually, carried carefully, and exercised with restraint' (Anapugars, 2026; Guardian Life, 2026).	Aligns with relational and servant-leadership models rather than transactional, individual-achievement framings common in Western executive profiling.
Trust built through collective intelligence and listening	Umeoji states: 'Leading Zenith Bank has reminded me that leadership is, above all, about people, trust, and consistency', and: 'I have learned to listen more deeply and to respect the power of collective intelligence. No leader sees everything' (Guardian Life, 2026).	Consistent with transformational and inclusive leadership constructs, trust here is constructed relationally rather than asserted through positional authority.
Mentorship and 'lifting as you climb'	Onyeali-Ikpe hosts recurring women's roundtables under the HerFidelity program proposition and urges women: 'Seek out mentors, invest in meaningful relationships, and above all, collaborate because no one truly succeeds alone' (Fidelity Bank Plc, 2025).	Reflects a collective rather than individualistic leadership ethic, distinguishing this group's public narrative from the individualist 'lean in' strand of neoliberal feminism critiqued in earlier marketing literature.
Internal credibility through long tenure ('insider trust')	Umeoji rose from an NYSC posting to group CEO over 30 years, 26 of them at Zenith; Onyeali-Ikpe, Edun and Smith each spent two decades or more inside the institutions or sector they came to lead (Michael, 2024; Balogun, 2024).	Suggests trust in this context is earned cumulatively through demonstrated institutional loyalty, a pattern with no strong equivalent in Western 'outsider CEO' leadership literature.
Dual legitimation: local roots, global credentialing	Nearly every profile pairs a Nigerian first degree with executive education at Harvard, Wharton, Columbia or MIT Sloan, explicitly cited as evidence of preparedness (Anapugars, 2026; Guardian Life, 2026; Michael, 2024).	Functions as a credibility-signalling strategy distinct from, though related to, the 'double consciousness' literature on minority professionals proving competence in dominant institutional frames.
Appearance as both asset and obstacle	Umeoji was known pre-appointment as 'one of the most glamorous female bankers in the country'; coverage states there was 'much more to Dr Adaora Umeoji beyond beauty and elan', implying her competence needed separate proving (Anapugars, 2026).	Echoes the attractiveness halo effect, where physical appearance shapes inferred competence and trustworthiness, but also suggests an accompanying credibility tax: attractiveness invites scrutiny that must be actively countered with credentials.

Sources: compiled from interview and profile material in Businessday NG, THISDAY Live, TheCable, Punch and Opinion Nigeria (2024–2026).

Two of these themes warrant further unpacking. The first is the appearance theme. Coverage of Umeoji's appointment repeatedly notes that, prior to her elevation, she was known in banking circles as 'one of the most glamorous female bankers in the country', and several profile pieces explicitly state that there was 'much more to her beyond beauty and elan', implying that attractiveness alone would not have been read as sufficient evidence of competence and instead required active counter-narration through credentials, tenure and results. This pattern is consistent with the attractiveness halo effect documented in psychological and management literature, where physically attractive individuals are inferred to be more competent, trustworthy and socially capable even absent direct evidence (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Kordsmeyer, Freund, Ueshima, Kuroda, Kameda, & Penke, 2024). However, the Nigerian banking coverage suggests a gendered complication of the halo effect: rather than attractiveness functioning as a pure credibility shortcut, it appears in these narratives as something to be overcome or supplemented, hinting that for senior Black women specifically, attractiveness may invite an additional burden of proof rather than functioning as a straightforward advantage, a dynamic underexplored in the largely Western, often male-centred halo effect literature.

The second is the trust-through-relationality theme. Both Umeoji and Onyeali-Ikpe explicitly define leadership in relational rather than positional terms; statements such as 'leadership is, above all, about people, trust, and consistency' and 'no one truly succeeds alone' recur across multiple, independently published interviews. This relational framing diverges from the individualised, achievement-centred leadership narratives more typical of Western executive profiling, and instead resembles models of trust-building through demonstrated collective orientation, consistent with emerging work on intersectional inequalities in work and employment that stresses how minoritised leaders often must construct legitimacy through visible communal benefit rather than individual authority alone (Rodriguez, Guenther, Nkomo, & Mandiola, 2024).

Reframing Intersectionality Beyond a Racial-Minority Context

Crenshaw's (1991) concept of intersectionality was developed to explain how race and gender interact to produce distinct forms of marginalisation for Black women in a white-majority society, where racial difference functions as a primary axis of exclusion. Much of the subsequent literature on Black women's underrepresentation in leadership, in academia and in advertising, has retained this racial framing, situating the Black woman against a predominantly white institutional backdrop (Esnard & Cobb-Roberts, 2018; Wright, Thompson, & Channer, 2007; Rollock, 2019). Pogrebna et al. (2024) analysis of intersectional racial and gender biases in leadership over two centuries confirms that Black female leaders continue to face unique challenges, being promoted at a slower pace and remaining significantly underrepresented in top leadership roles even as women overall make gains, with intersectionality dynamics producing effects qualitatively distinct from those of either race or gender operating alone.

In Nigeria, this framing requires adjustment. Black women are not a racial minority; as noted above, they constitute close to 60% of the banking workforce (Olatunji, 2025). Race recedes as the primary axis of exclusion, while four other intersecting categories move to the foreground and interact with one another: ethnicity or tribe, religion, physical attractiveness, and educational background. Critically, as Crenshaw (1991) emphasised, it is the interaction of multiple social categories, not their simple accumulation, which produces distinct forms of disadvantage and opportunity, and this insight applies to Black-majority settings as well as to white-majority ones.

Ethnicity and tribe function in Nigerian corporate life in ways formally recognised in the public sector through the federal character principle, which mandates balanced representation across Nigeria's ethnic and geopolitical zones in government appointments, even though no equivalent statutory mandate applies to private banks. Public commentary accompanying several senior appointments has drawn attention to ethnic origin alongside professional credentials (Irogboli, 2024), suggesting ethnicity remains a live, if informally policed, axis of scrutiny even in ostensibly merit-based processes. For Black women executives specifically, ethnicity intersects with gender in a context where extended-family and community expectations are often ethnically inflected, a distinction with no parallel in the race-centred intersectionality literature but consistent with the broader call for intercategorical analysis adapted to specific geographic and institutional contexts (Genga and Babalola 2024).

Religion functions as a related but distinct axis. Nigeria's near-even Christian-Muslim split, concentrated regionally, means that a woman executive's religious affiliation is often legible from her name, dress, or regional origin before she speaks. Halima Buba's profile, as the only northern, Muslim-associated executive among the cases examined here, represents an important point of contrast: her path traversed both the gender barriers common to all profiled executives and the additional scrutiny facing northern Muslim women in an industry leadership culture disproportionately shaped by southern, Christian professional networks. This interaction between religious identity, regional origin and gender constitutes a specifically Nigerian axis of intersecting disadvantage that existing leadership literature, even its African-focused strand, has not yet theorised systematically.

Physical attractiveness operates as a further intersecting axis with particular salience in the Nigerian context. The attractiveness halo effect (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972; Kordsmeyer et al., 2024) produces inferences of competence and trustworthiness from physical appearance. However, Jones et al.'s (2024) comprehensive review of 53 empirical studies on colourism among Black women finds that skin tone discrimination negatively affects career outcomes and perceived competence even within Black communities, complicating the assumption that the halo effect operates uniformly for Black women. Gardner-Kennedy's (2023, as reviewed in Gassam Asare, 2026) research on colourism in Black women's leadership roles specifically found that many women in these positions failed to recognise skin tone bias as a form of discrimination, suggesting the axis operates below the level of conscious articulation even as it shapes outcomes. The Nigerian media coverage of Umeoji's appointment, which explicitly noted there was much more to her beyond beauty and elan, illustrates the double-edged operation of this axis: attractiveness invites public attention but simultaneously invites an additional burden of proof that competence must be separately demonstrated.

Educational background constitutes the fourth axis, and the clearest pattern in the secondary data: every profiled executive combined a Nigerian first degree with Western postgraduate study or executive education. Bourdieu's (1986) concept of institutionalised cultural capital, formal qualifications and credentials that carry recognised social value convertible into economic capital and legitimate authority, provides a theoretical language for this pattern. In contexts where authority might otherwise be questioned on grounds of gender, ethnicity or religion, Western credentials function as convertible institutional capital that partially overrides those other axes of scrutiny, legitimating the holder's claim to leadership in the eyes of different institutional audiences simultaneously. This dual local/global credentialing strategy may represent a specifically postcolonial iteration of what Bourdieu identified as credential-based legitimation, operating across two institutional registers, the Nigerian and the Western, rather than one. A study of Black African women managers in the Kenyan and South African banking sectors similarly found that even within Black-majority contexts, intersecting identities produce distinct leadership barriers and perceptions that credentials alone do not fully resolve (Genga and Babalola, 2024), underscoring that educational capital is necessary but not sufficient. These supports retaining intersectionality as the theoretical lens while substituting its analytical categories, ethnicity, religion, attractiveness and education, for the racial categories that do not map onto the Nigerian setting.

From Barriers to Traits: A Shift in Theoretical Focus

The bulk of existing literature on women in Nigerian leadership remains oriented toward explaining absence rather than presence. Qualitative research involving bank employees and leaders across Lagos found that achieving gender equality at senior levels is strongly predicated on organisational work culture, and that the CBN gender mandate created opportunities primarily for women who were determined and prepared to build careers in the industry, with banks resisting promotion of women they deemed insufficiently competent regardless of regulatory pressure (Eleje and Wale-Oshinowo, 2017). A systematic literature review of gender inequalities and academic leadership in Nigeria, South Africa and the United Kingdom confirms that much of the current research on women and leadership focuses on cisgender white women in western institutions, and that frameworks built on this base do not adequately represent the structural complexities facing women in African institutional contexts (Kaymakcioglu et al., 2024). This represents both a gap and an opportunity for the present paper.

Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) remains the dominant framework for understanding why women in authority face a double bind: behave in line with feminine stereotypes and risk being seen as insufficiently authoritative; behave in line with masculine leadership norms and risk social penalty for violating gender expectations. This penalty is compounded at the intersection of gender and other social categories: Dupree's (2024) large-scale analysis of nearly 18,000 editorials found that the more women leaders used dominance language, the more they were portrayed as cold, and these effects were strongest for Black and Latina women. A concurrent review confirms that role incongruity consistently produces lower evaluations of female leaders' suitability and effectiveness, even when their performance equals or exceeds that of male counterparts (Chikwe et al., 2024). Such findings point toward a distinct intersectional double bind for Black women leaders: not simply the sum of gender and racial penalties, but a qualitatively different constraint shaped by their simultaneous interaction (Johnson, 2025; Pogrebna et al. 2024).

In Nigeria, cultural patriarchy rather than race intensifies this dynamic. Female bank leaders who adopt assertive, transactional styles risk penalties for departing from socially prescribed feminine norms, while those who adopt relational, consensus-oriented styles risk being coded as insufficiently robust for large-bank governance. The relational, stewardship-centred public narratives of Umeoji and Onyeali-Ikpe identified in Table 2 are consistent with this broader Sub-Saharan African pattern of female leadership self-presentation, and may reflect a strategic navigation of the double bind: foregrounding communal benefit and institutional humility over individual conquest sidesteps the too-masculine, too-feminine trap while remaining legible as competent within Nigerian cultural norms of collective obligation. Emerging research further suggests that Black women leaders frequently embrace higher-risk leadership strategies specifically to counter intersectional invisibility, yet their aspirations to convert crisis-related visibility into durable power are disproportionately unfulfilled (Pogrebna et al. 2024).

The glass cliff thesis (Ryan & Haslam, 2005, 2007) adds a further structural dimension, proposing that women are disproportionately appointed to leadership during periods of organisational crisis or heightened risk. Reinwald, Zaia, and Kunze (2023) have linked this theoretically to signalling theory: appointing a woman function as a visible signal of intended change when an organisation is under public scrutiny. Takizawa, Iacoviello, and Kulich (2024) extend this further, distinguishing between crisis-based glass cliff appointments and signal-based ones, and finding that organisational crisis in the public spotlight increases preference for female leaders specifically when decision-makers seek to signal transformation. Research on Black women in glass-cliff positions specifically finds they are routinely elevated without sufficient support or authority, under heightened scrutiny, and with limited conversion of crisis-triggered appointment into durable power (Chance, 2022; Gassam Asare, 2025). The Agbede case at Access Holdings fits this pattern closely: an acting appointment triggered by sudden crisis, publicly framed as temporary, never converted into a permanent role, and ultimately succeeded by a male chief executive.

Women's World Banking (2022) research across Nigeria's finance industry, drawing on interviews with over forty women leaders and key informants, identifies the CBN mandate, evolving social norms, and the growth of formal mentorship and sponsorship networks as principal drivers of advancement into leadership. Ehikioya (2025) finds further that the impact of female inclusion on corporate board performance in Nigerian companies is significant specifically when female directors have relevant board experience and hold at minimum a bachelor's degree, a finding that connects the educational credentialing pattern identified in Table 1 to measurable governance outcomes. Yet this literature remains descriptive of pathways into leadership; it does not yet theorise how leadership traits and styles are shaped by, or negotiated against, intersecting social positions once women are in post, nor how ethnicity, religion, attractiveness and educational background interact to shape perceived trustworthiness. This paper's analytical contribution lies precisely in this gap.

Towards a Research Agenda

This paper proposes four directions for future conceptual and empirical work. First, the six leadership-trait themes identified in Table 2, institutional stewardship, relationally-built trust, collective mentorship, internally-earned credibility, dual credentialing, and the double-edged appearance effect, should be tested through structured interviews or content analysis of a larger sample of executive communications, to establish whether they represent a genuine pattern or an artefact of the limited public profile data available for this study. Second, research should examine how ethnicity, religion, attractiveness and education interact rather than operate independently, for instance whether dual Western/local credentialing offsets ethnic or religious scrutiny more effectively than it offsets appearance-based scrutiny, a question this conceptual paper can only raise, not resolve, on secondary data alone. Third, comparative work should examine whether the Agbede case's glass-cliff pattern recurs elsewhere in Nigerian or African corporate succession, particularly around unplanned leadership transitions. Fourth, work is needed on how regulatory mandates such as the CBN's diversity targets interact with organisational culture to either enable substantive authority or produce a form of visible but constrained inclusion, with the volatility of the female-CEO headcount offering a natural entry point for such inquiry.

Addressing these questions would extend marketing, management and leadership theory beyond a model in which Black women's experience is theorised primarily through the lens of racial exclusion in white-majority institutions, toward one capable of accounting for intersecting structural dynamics, ethnicity, religion, attractiveness and education, within Black-majority, post-colonial, regulatorily-mandated settings such as Nigerian banking.

Conclusion

Numerical gains in Black women's representation in Nigerian banking leadership mark genuine progress, gains that secondary data show are substantially attributable to deliberate regulatory intervention rather than organic cultural change alone. But they do not, by themselves, resolve the theoretical gap this paper has identified. Published interviews and profiles of senior Nigerian women bank executives reveal recurring leadership-trait themes, stewardship, relational trust, collective mentorship, internally-earned credibility, dual credentialing, and a complicated relationship with physical appearance, that existing leadership theory, built largely on Western, racially-framed intersectionality, does not fully account for. Without attention to how ethnicity, religion, attractiveness and educational background interact to shape trust and leadership perception once women attain senior office, both research and practice risk mistaking visibility for full inclusion. This paper argues for a reoriented intersectional lens, one that retains the analytical power of Crenshaw's framework while substituting categories appropriate to a Black-majority, regulatorily-driven context, as a necessary foundation for the next phase of research on women's leadership in African financial services.

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METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK FOR AN INTEGRATED QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO GREEN HUMAN RESOURCEMANAGEMENT IN NIGERIA'SOIL AND GAS INDUSTRY

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Abstract

This paper presentsthe methodological frameworkunderpinning an integrated-format doctoral thesis that examine green human resource management (GHRM) in Nigeria's oil and gas industry. Grounded in a constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, the inquiry adopted an inductive, cross-sectional qualitative strategy to investigate how institutional pressures shape GHRM adoption and implementation, how employees perceive implementation challenges, and how GHRM enactment influences green commitment and performance. These objectives were addressed across three integrated empirical studies, drawing on institutional theory, cognitive consistency theory,and the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework as the organising theoretical lenses. The study was conducted across 14 companies spanning the upstream, midstream, and downstream sectors, encompassing international oil companies, indigenous companies, and a joint venture gas company. Purposive and snowball sampling were employed across three iterative recruitment phases, incorporating LinkedIn-based outreach and an onlinesurvey platform to access a professionally boundedand geographically dispersed population. A total of 30 participants, comprising HR managers,HSE professionals, and field engineers, were recruited. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection instrument, designed in accordance with the responsive interview model and structured to address the objectives of all three empirical studies within a single interview process. Data were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, supported by NVivo software for systematic coding and thematic development. The paper advances methodological understanding of qualitative GHRM inquiry in developing countrycontexts, demonstrating that adaptive sampling strategies and integrated multi-study designs are both methodologically defensible and practically necessary in institutionally complex and professionally sensitive research environments.

Keywords: *greenhuman resource management; qualitative methodology; constructivist- interpretivism; reflexive thematic analysis; oil and gas industry; Nigeria*

1.**Introduction**

This paper presents the methodological framework that underpinned an integrated-format doctoral thesis, examining green human resource management (GHRM) through three qualitative empirical studies. GHRM refers to the integration of environmental considerations into core HRM functions, including recruitment and selection, training and development, performance management, reward systems and employee involvement (Renwick et al., 2013; Tang et al., 2018).

This paper is grounded in the context of Nigeria's oil and gas industry, which constitutes a methodologically underexplored setting for qualitative GHRM inquiry. The sensitivity of corporate environmental practices, the professional status of the target population, and the geographic dispersion of participants across operational locations collectively present distinctive challenges relatedto participant access,confidentiality, and the choice of data collection procedures. These contextual conditions directly shaped the methodological decisions documented in this paper. The inquiry was conducted across 14 oil and gas companies operating in Nigeria, comprising three international oil companies (IOCs), ten indigenous companies (ICs), and one joint venture gas company (JVGC) co-owned by three international companies and the stateoil company. The sample cuts across professionals across the upstream, midstream, and downstream sectors, ensuring that the methodological framework accounts for a range of operational contexts and environmental management responsibilities.

The methodological frameworkwas designed to address threeintegrated empirical objectives: first, to examine how institutional pressures influence GHRM adoption and implementation and investigate the gaps between formally adopted and actually enacted GHRM practices; second, to identify challenges associated with GHRM implementation and examine how employees perceive those challenges throughthe implementation process;and third, to explore the enactment of GHRM and employees' perceptions of its impacton their greencommitment and performance. These objectives were distinctly addressed in three different empirical papers, of which two of these have been published in the Business Strategy and the Environment Journal. The complexity and contextually embedded nature of these objectives necessitated a qualitative methodological approach, as discussed in the sections that follow.

1.1Research Philosophy and Paradigms

Research philosophy refersto the foundational system of values and assumptions regardingthe nature of reality and the development of knowledge (Saunders et al., 2023). These positions are captured within a research paradigm comprising ontological (the nature of reality), epistemological (the nature of knowledge), and methodological (the process of knowledge acquisition) stances(Creswell & Poth,2018). Such assumptions influence what is studied, how research is conducted, and how findings are interpreted (Bryman, 2016).

The inquiry adopted a constructivist-interpretivist position. Constructivism assumes that knowledge is not discovered but co-constructed through dialogue, reflection, and experience (Hay, 2016; Krauss, 2005), recognising the socially constructed nature of reality and knowledge (Mir & Watson, 2000). Interpretivism emphasises the subjective meanings that individuals assign to their experiences (Schwandt, 1994; Krauss, 2005). Together, these positions provide an appropriate foundation for investigating how employees in the Nigerian oil and gas industry experience and interpret GHRM within their specific organisational settings. This position facilitated flexible engagement with subjective and contextualised experiences, enabling an in-depth investigation of how individuals interpret environmental practices within the organisational cultures in which meaning is constructed.

2.Methodological Approachand Research Strategy

Aligned with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm, a cross-sectional qualitative methodologicalorientation was adopted,resting on the view that reality is sociallyinfluenced and that knowledgedevelops through interaction, interpretation, and reflection within specific contexts (Denzin et al., 2006). An inductive approach was adopted, entailing theory building from empirical data, allowing the researcher to observe patterns and draw meanings from participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This prioritises understanding over measurement and sees knowledge as socially constructed through interaction and interpretation (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Schwandt, 1994), aligning with the constructivist-interpretivist paradigm and the exploratory nature of the inquiry.

A qualitative research strategy was adopted, emphasising depth, context, and the subjective understanding of GHRM practices within the complex institutional and organisational environment of the Nigerian oil and gas industry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mason, 2018). Qualitative inquiryacknowledges the activerole of the researcher in sense making,enabling a reflexive engagement with data throughout the research process (Finlay, 2002; Tracy, 2010). A cross-sectional time horizon was adopted to capture the dynamics of GHRM implementation at a single point in time. This design aligns with the exploratory nature of the inquiry, which seeks to understand participants' perceptions and experiences rather than aiming to track changes or establish causal relationships. Given the challenges associated with accessing professionals in the Nigerian oil and gas industry, including confidentiality concerns and the sensitivity of environmental management practices, repeated data collection was not feasible, making a cross-sectional design appropriate (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003; Bryman, 2016).

3.Research Methods

3.1 Sampling and Recruitment

The research inquiryadopted purposive samplingas the primary technique, complemented by snowball sampling. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on specific inclusion criteria relevant to the objectives of the study (Palinkas et al., 2015), guided by the researcher's judgement to include individuals with rich, contextual knowledge of the research subject (Etikanet al., 2016).Snowball sampling, involving initial participants referring others within their professional networks who meet the inclusion criteria (Naderifar et al., 2017), was deployed to reach eligible participants who were otherwise hard to access (Biernacki & Waldorf, 1981; Atkinson& Flint, 2001). Participants were selected based on explicitinclusion criteria: holding operational roles related to environmental policy compliance and HRM and possessing at least three years of work experience in the oil and gas industry.

The recruitment processwas conducted across three iterativephases. In the pilot phase, initial contacts were facilitated through the research department of the Central Bank of Nigeria (CBN), where the researcher was employed at the time of data collection. Participant selection initially targeted HR managers and operational engineers. However, the pilot phase revealed that Health, Safety, and Environment (HSE) professionals were key drivers of environmental policy compliance, necessitating their subsequent inclusion in the sample. This process identified 27 potential participants, of whom 8 were successfully recruited and interviewed.

The snowballing process could not be sustained beyond the pilot phase, as employees in the Nigerian oil and gas industry were difficult to access. Atkinson & Flint (2001) note that hard- to-reach populations, including elites, depend on trust and referral within existing social networks. Accordingly, participants for the second phase were recruited via LinkedIn, which proved effective as professional affiliations encouraged engagement and profile information facilitated identification of suitable candidates. A total of 152 connection requestsand in-mail messages were sent to targeted professionals, resulting in 58 acceptances and, after repeated follow-ups, 17 participants recruited, bringing the cumulative total to 25 participants for Study One.

Following the pilot and main recruitment stages, additional recruitment became necessary to improve the representation of indigenous companies. An online survey hosted by JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), a UK-based digital services organisation, was used, with Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Participant Agreement Form (PAF) embedded within the survey,ensuring informed consentwas obtained electronically. Of 11 potential participants who completed the forms, 5 met the inclusion criteriaand were recruited, bringing the total to 30 participants across 14 companies for Studies One, Two, and Three.

Data saturation was achieved after 25 participants in Study One, as indicatedby the recurrence of themes, consistency in participant responses, and the absenceof new insights (Fusch &Ness, 2015). The additional five participants were recruited not dueto a lack of thematicsaturation, but to enhance representational adequacy of indigenous companies, in line with qualitative sampling principles recognising that sample size decisions should consider saturation, study scope, and sample diversity (Francis et al., 2010; Marshall et al., 2013). Study One drew on data from 25 participants; Studies Two and Three drew on the existing 25 participants and five additional recruits, making a total of 30 participants. Each participant completedone interview, structured across three sections corresponding to the objectives of the three empirical studies.

4.2 Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed to collect data. Semi-structured interviews provide a flexible and systematic means of gainingin-depth insights into participants' experiences and organisational practices, makingthem particularly suitablefor exploring complexand context- specific phenomena (Myers, 2019). The sensitivity of corporate environmental practices in Nigeria's oil and gas industrymeans that candiddisclosure requires a confidential and flexible approach to data collection. Assembling practitioners in a shared settingrisks group dynamics and conformity pressures that may limitopenness, while most operational engineers are largely offshore-based, making group-based data collection impractical. Semi-structured interviews with individuals were therefore the most appropriate means of facilitating open and contextually rich engagement (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Bryman, 2016).

An interview guide was designed drawing on Rubin and Rubin's (2005) responsive interview model. While integrating the principles of institutional theory, cognitive consistency theory, and the ability-motivation-opportunity (AMO) framework, the interview questions were structured to explore the objectives of the study,allocated across three studies whichform the core sections of the integrated thesis inquiry. The questions were open-ended, allowing for a degree of openness in responses (Wengraf, 2001).

A pilot phase was undertaken prior to the main interviews, serving four functions: validating the sampling strategy; necessitating adjustment of inclusion criteria; refining the interview guide; and assessing the feasibility of virtual interviews. The pilot revealed that most participants were unfamiliar with the term "Green HRM", necessitating rewording of the interview guide to clarify that "green" when incorporated into HRM refersto the integration of environmental policies into HR functions. Security concerns in Nigeria and the offshore location of most engineers meant that interviews were conducted virtually via Microsoft Teams, with two participants switching to Zoom. Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes and was transcribed verbatim for thematic analysis.

4.3 Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) were adopted as the most appropriate analytical method, presenting a structured and iterative approach for interpreting data collected through semi-structured interviews. The six phases proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006; 2021b) were employed. Data familiarisation involved transcribing recorded interviews and readingt ranscripts multiple times to ensure deep understanding of participants' narratives, with each review lasting between two and three hours. Coding was conducted reflexively and iteratively to identify meanings relevant to the study objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2019), supported by NVivo software for systematic data management (Woolf& Silver, 2017) and an audit trail from codes to source excerpts (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

Themes were conceptualised as patterns of shared meaning organised around a central organising concept (Braun& Clarke, 2021b),emerging inductively from participants' accounts in line with the theoretical lenses used. Institutional theory guided the inquiry into institutional influences on GHRM adoption and implementation; cognitive consistency theory informed the examination of employees' perceptions of GHRM implementation challenges; and the AMO framework underpinned the investigation of GHRM enactment. Generated themes were reviewed at two levels: against coded data extracts and against the full dataset, before being refined, defined, and named to capture their central organising concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2021b). The final phase involved crafting a coherent narrative integrating data extracts, analytical commentary, and existing literature (Braun & Clarke,2006; 2023). NVivo software enhanced transparency and consistency by enabling the researcher to trace coded databack to original sources, maintaining interpretive rigour (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Woolf & Silver, 2017).

5.Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was demonstrated through four interrelated criteria: credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility was enhanced throughiterative probing during semi-structured interviews, multiple rounds of manual transcription and thematic refinement, member checking in which participants reviewed their transcripts and verified interpretations (Birt et al., 2016), and peer debriefing through engagement with academic supervisors, participation in four doctoral colloquia, and presentation at four external academic conferences. Transferability was addressed throughthick description of the research setting, organisational types, participant roles, and sectoral dynamics, enabling readers to assess the relevance and applicability of the findings to comparable contexts (Tracy, 2010; Nowell et al., 2017). Dependability was achieved through an audit trail documenting all methodological decisions, a structured data log, a reflexive journal,and periodic reviewsof the coding framework with supervisors (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Nowell et al., 2017). Confirmability was maintained through grounding analysis in participants' narratives corroborated through direct quotations, NVivo traceability linking themes to coded segments, and peer debriefing (Shenton, 2004).

6.Researcher's Positionand Reflexivity

Reflexivity is an ongoing processof critically assessing potential biases, power dynamics, and ethical dilemmas throughout the research process (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). The researcher's background of over a decade working in the research department of the Central Bank of Nigeria providedcontextual familiarity with the oil and gas industry's regulatory and institutional environment. However, this background introduced the risk of framing organisationalchallenges through a macroeconomic lens rather than capturing the perceptions of industry professionals. The researcher remained self-aware that this background might shape interactions with participants and data analysis(Finlay, 2002), maintaining reflexive strategies throughout, including a reflexive journal documenting assumptions and preconceptions throughout the research process.

A significant reflexive moment arose when the pilot interviews revealed that HSE professionals, not HR managers alone, drive environmental policy compliance. Without this reflexive adaptation, a considerable aspect of GHRM implementation, including the operational enforcement of environmental policies, would have been underexplored. To mitigate potential bias, an open-ended approach and neutrality were maintained during data collection, allowing participants to lead discussions based on their own experiences. Peer debriefing through doctoral colloquiums, conference participations, and journal peer review played a crucial role in challenging assumptions, improving analytical consistency, and strengthening interpretative credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

1.**Ethical Considerations**

The inquiry adhered to the ethical guidelines of the Faculty of Business School and the Research Committee at Bournemouth University. Participants received an Information Sheet and Participant Agreement Form prior to data collection, covering informed consent, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw at any stage without providing a reason.Informed consent was also obtainedelectronically for participants recruited via the JISC online survey platform. Personal identifiers were removed from transcripts and pseudonyms assigned to participants. Data were stored securely on a password-protected university network, with access restricted to the researcher and supervisory team in line with applicable data-protection regulations (Israel & Hay, 2006; Orb et al., 2001).

2.Theoretical and Methodological Implications

The methodological framework documented in this paper carries several implications for qualitative inquiry in organisational and management research, particularly in contexts characterised by institutional complexity, elite professional populations, and sector-specific sensitivity. The adaptive recruitment trajectory, moving from chain-referral sampling through LinkedIn-based recruitment to an online survey platform, demonstrates that methodological flexibility in sampling is not a compromise of rigour but a necessary condition of credible qualitative inquiry in professionally bounded and institutionally sensitive contexts. This has implications for researchers designing qualitative studies targeting elite professionals in extractive industries and comparable developing country settings, where conventional gatekeeping arrangements and face-to-face recruitment are not reliably feasible.

The three-study integrated design advances methodological understanding of how qualitative frameworks can be structured to address layered and theoretically distinct research objectives within a single data collection process. Rather than treating each empirical study as a discrete methodological unit, the integrated design allowed a single interview, structured across three thematic sections, to generate data capable of addressing six research objectives simultaneously. This approach offersa methodological templatefor doctoral and post-doctoral qualitative inquiries seeking analytical depth across multiple theoretical lenses without requiring separate data collection phases, thereby addressing practical constraints of access, time, and participant burden.

The application of reflexive thematic analysis principles (Braun & Clarke, 2021a) across an integrated three-study qualitative design further extends methodological understanding of this approach beyond single-study inquiries. Theiterative movement between institutional theory, cognitive consistency theory, and the AMO framework across three analytically distinct studies demonstrates that reflexive thematic analysis is sufficiently flexible to accommodate theoretically plural and structurally complex qualitative designs. This has implications for researchers employing reflexive thematic analysis in studies where multiple theoretical frameworks operate simultaneously across a shared dataset.

Finally, the constructivist-interpretivist positioning adopted in this inquiry addresses a methodological gap in GHRM scholarship, which has historically concentrated empirical inquiry in Western and East Asian organisational contexts. The methodological framework documented here provides a replicable design for qualitative GHRM inquiry in institutionally complex developing country settings, contributing to the broader project of contextualising GHRM research beyond its established empirical boundaries.

3.Conclusion

This paper has presented the philosophical and practical frameworks underpinning an integrated-formatdoctoral thesis examining GHRM in Nigeria’s oil and gas industry. A cross- sectional qualitative strategy was adopted as appropriate for capturing the complexity of GHRM in this context, grounded in constructivist-interpretivist ontological and epistemological stances and an inductive reasoning approach. The sampling strategyintegrated purposive and snowball sampling across three iterative recruitment phases to ensure that participants possessed relevant experience within diverse organisational contexts. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed through the six phases of reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021a), supported by NVivo software for systematic coding, categorisation, and thematic development. Trustworthiness was maintained through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability strategies, while ethical reflexivity was sustained throughout, acknowledging and mitigating potential researcher biases through self-reflection, member checking, peer debriefing, and review processes. The methodological framework documented here advances qualitative inquiry in GHRM research and offers a replicable design for researchers conducting integrated qualitative studies in institutionally complex and professionally sensitive contexts.

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LEADING WITH, THROUGH, AND BEYOND AI: AN AI-AUGMENTED ADAPTIVE LEADERSHIP FRAMEWORK FOR HUMAN CENTERED ALGORITHMIC TRANSFORMATION

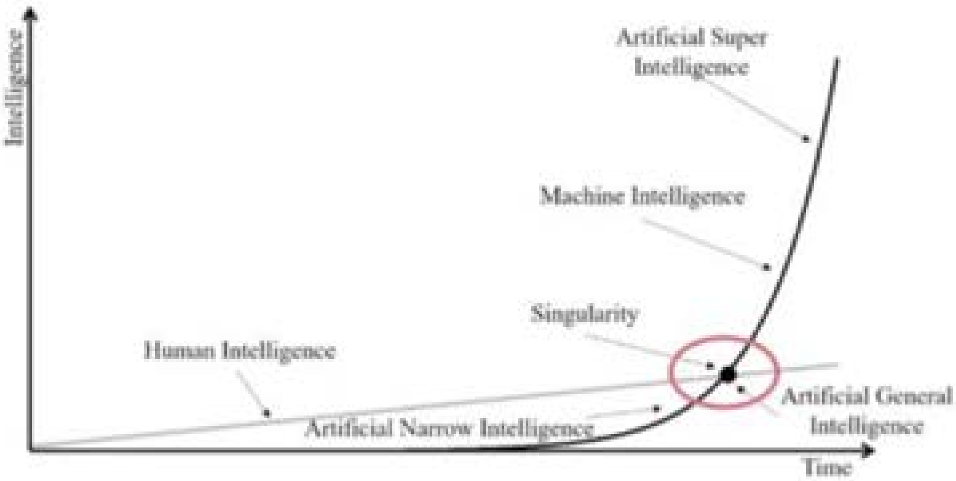
Xiaolin Chen and Christian Harrison

Introduction

What kind of leadership is required when artificial intelligence is no longer merely a technical instrument but a cognitive, strategic, ethical, and sociotechnical force that reshapes organizational judgment, authority, work, and human identity? This question has become increasingly urgent as artificial intelligence (AI), machine learning, predictive analytics, natural language processing, robotics, and generative AI systems move from peripheral automation into the core of organizational decision-making and value creation (Berente et al., 2021; Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Davenport, 2018; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AI is increasingly used to support organizational decision-making, cognitive insight, process automation, customer engagement, risk analysis, and business model innovation, thereby shifting AI from a peripheral technology to a strategic organizational capability (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021; Sjödin et al., 2021). As AI becomes embedded in organizational routines, leadership must evolve from managing people and technology separately toward orchestrating responsible human–AI collaboration in ways that preserve accountability, trust, ethical judgment, and human dignity (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Figure 1: Development Stages of AI

Figure 1:

Development Stages of AI



Note: Peifer et al., 2022

The rapid acceleration of AI adoption has also exposed the limitations of many established leadership theories. Traditional leadership theories, including trait, behavioral, situational, transactional, transformational, servant, authentic, and strategic leadership approaches, continue to offer important insights into influence, motivation, vision, ethics, and organizational change (Northouse, 2025). However, these theories were largely developed before the emergence of intelligent systems capable of learning, predicting, recommending, classifying, generating, and influencing organizational decisions at scale (Berente et al., 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Even digital leadership and technology leadership literatures often focus on transformation capability, digital strategy, innovation, and platform adaptation, while giving less attention to AI's distinctive features: algorithmic opacity, autonomous learning, human–machine complementarity, data-driven authority, ethical bias, and the redistribution of judgment between human and non-human agents (Berente et al., 2021; Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).

This expanded abstract develops the AI-Augmented Adaptive Leadership (AIAAL) framework as a novel leadership paradigm for AI-intensive organizations. The framework positions AI simultaneously as an augmentation partner, an adaptive challenge, and a sociotechnical actor within organizational systems. This threefold understanding is essential because AI can enhance leadership cognition, strategic foresight, decision support, and operational intelligence by expanding organizational capacity for cognitive insight, process automation, and predictive analysis (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). At the same time, AI can generate uncertainty, resistance, accountability gaps, workplace control concerns, and threats to human agency when algorithmic systems influence how work is evaluated, coordinated, or decided (Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).

The novelty of AIAAL does not reside in adding more theories to adaptive leadership, but in specifying how adaptive work changes when artificial intelligence becomes a participant in organizational cognition. Adaptive leadership explains how leaders mobilize people to confront value-laden challenges for which existing expertise is insufficient (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009). However, AI introduces a new condition: part of the diagnostic, predictive, classificatory, and recommendatory work of leadership is increasingly performed by opaque, data-trained, and continuously learning systems (Berente et al., 2021; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AIAAL therefore extends adaptive leadership by theorizing leadership not only as mobilizing people through uncertainty, but also as governing the redistribution of judgment between humans and intelligent machines.

The AIAAL framework is grounded in the distinction between technical problems and adaptive challenges. Heifetz (1994) and Heifetz et al. (2009) argue that technical problems can be solved through existing expertise, whereas adaptive challenges require shifts in values, beliefs, roles, behaviors, and relationships. AI implementation frequently appears technical because it involves data infrastructure, algorithmic design, model accuracy, cybersecurity, and systems integration (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). Yet in practice, AI transformation is deeply adaptive because it can destabilize professional identity, employee trust, expertise, authority structures, and perceptions of control when algorithmic systems reshape how work is monitored, evaluated, coordinated, or decided (Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Leaders must therefore determine which AI-related challenges require technical expertise and which require collective learning, moral reasoning, cultural adaptation, and disciplined attention to human consequences (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009).

AIAAL further responds to the automation–augmentation paradox in AI management. Raisch and Krakowski (2021) argue that AI can both substitute for and complement human labor, creating tensions between automation and augmentation. Davenport and Ronanki (2018) similarly emphasize that organizations gain value from AI when leaders understand the appropriate relationship between human expertise and machine intelligence. The AIAAL framework extends this literature by arguing that leadership in the AI era requires "augmented judgment": the ability to use AI-generated insights while maintaining human responsibility, ethical interpretation, contextual awareness, and stakeholder accountability. In this sense, AI should not be treated as a neutral tool or autonomous authority, but as a powerful cognitive partner that must be governed through human-centered leadership practices (Berente et al., 2021; Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019).

The urgency of this framework is intensified by growing concern over AI-related risks. AI scholars and ethicists have warned that advanced AI systems may intensify bias, surveillance, misinformation, labor displacement, dependency, cybersecurity vulnerability, and loss of human control (Bengio et al., 2024; Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019). In organizational contexts, these risks are not abstract. They emerge in recruitment algorithms that reproduce inequality, financial models that obscure accountability, healthcare systems that influence clinical decisions, educational AI systems that reshape learning, and workplace analytics that may intensify surveillance and reduce autonomy (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport & Mittal, 2023; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). AIAAL therefore argues that responsible AI leadership must move beyond efficiency and innovation toward ethical stewardship, adaptive capacity, and human flourishing (Fry, 2003; Heifetz et al., 2009; Seligman, 2011).

The present study contributes to leadership scholarship by integrating adaptive leadership theory, AI augmentation literature, sociotechnical systems thinking, spiritual leadership, positive psychology, ethical AI governance, and paradigm shift theory. It contributes to practice by offering a framework through which leaders can diagnose AI induced technical and adaptive challenges, regulate disequilibrium, create psychological safety, protect human voice, govern algorithmic risks, and align AI adoption with dignity, trust, and sustainable value creation (Floridi et al., 2018; Fry, 2003; Heifetz et al., 2009; Jobin et al., 2019; Trist & Bamforth, 1951). In doing so, AIAAL reframes leadership for the algorithmic era as the capacity to lead with AI, through AI, and beyond AI: with AI as a collaborative intelligence, through AI as a transformation enabler, and beyond AI by preserving the moral, relational, and human purposes of leadership.

Theoretical Foundations

The AIAAL framework rests on six interrelated theoretical foundations: adaptive leadership theory, AI augmentation literature, sociotechnical systems theory, spiritual leadership theory, human flourishing, and paradigm shift theory. These foundations are necessary because AI leadership is not reducible to technical adoption, digital competence, or strategic transformation alone. Rather, AI leadership involves simultaneous management of technological capability, human adaptation, ethical responsibility, cultural meaning, and organizational learning (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport, 2018; Heifetz et al., 2009; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).

Adaptive leadership alone is necessary but insufficient for AI-intensive contexts. Adaptive leadership explains how leaders mobilize people through disequilibrium, value conflict, and uncertainty, but it does not directly theorize algorithmic opacity, automated decision support, machine-learning bias, human–AI complementarity, or accountability gaps created when consequential decisions are shaped by intelligent systems (Berente et al., 2021; Heifetz et al., 2009; Kellogg et al., 2020; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AIAAL resolves this limitation by adding an AI-specific layer to adaptive leadership: leaders must not only regulate human distress but also interrogate algorithmic outputs, design human–AI decision rights, and preserve human accountability when cognition is technologically distributed.

First, adaptive leadership theory provides the core architecture of the framework. Heifetz (1994) defines leadership as the activity of mobilizing people to confront difficult realities and adapt to complex challenges. Heifetz et al. (2009) further argue that adaptive leadership requires leaders to diagnose the system, regulate distress, maintain disciplined attention, give work back to people, and protect voices of dissent. These practices are highly relevant to AI transformation because leaders must help organizations confront uncertainty, resistance, ethical tensions, and changing role expectations. AI adoption is not merely about introducing advanced technologies; it is about helping people adapt to new forms of intelligence, authority, and accountability (Berente et al., 2021; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).

Second, AI augmentation literature informs the framework's understanding of AI as a strategic partner. Davenport (2018) argues that AI creates organizational advantage when it is applied to decision-making, automation, analytics, and innovation. Davenport and Ronanki (2018) distinguish between process automation, cognitive insight, and cognitive engagement, showing that AI can reshape both operational and strategic functions. Raisch and Krakowski (2021) extend this debate by highlighting the automation–augmentation paradox, where AI may either replace human labor or enhance human capability depending on organizational design and leadership choices. AIAAL builds on this literature by arguing that leaders must actively design human–AI complementarity rather than if AI adoption will automatically produce beneficial outcomes.

Third, sociotechnical systems theory provides the systemic logic of AIAAL. Trist and Bamforth (1951) argue that organizational performance depends on the joint optimization of social and technical systems. This insight is particularly important in AI-intensive organizations because algorithmic systems interact with human workflows, incentives, institutional norms, professional identities, and governance structures (Berente et al., 2021; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). AI failure is often not caused by technological weakness alone but by poor alignment between data systems, organizational culture, employee capabilities, ethical safeguards, and leadership practices (Davenport & Mittal, 2023; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018). AIAAL therefore treats AI implementation as a sociotechnical transformation requiring both technological design and human adaptation.

Fourth, spiritual leadership theory provides the moral and motivational foundation of the framework. Fry (2003) argues that spiritual leadership cultivates vision, hope, faith, altruistic love, meaning, and membership. AI can destabilize professional identity, autonomy, expertise, trust, and perceptions of control when algorithmic systems reshape how work is monitored, evaluated, coordinated, or decided (Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AIAAL applies spiritual leadership not in a religious sense, but as a human centered leadership orientation that preserves purpose, dignity, belonging, and ethical commitment amid technological disruption. AI leadership must therefore ask not only what AI can optimize, but what human purposes AI should serve.

Fifth, positive psychology and human flourishing offer the normative aim of the framework. Seligman (2011) conceptualizes flourishing through positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. In AI-intensive environments, flourishing may be strengthened if AI removes repetitive work, enhances learning, and supports creativity; however, it may also be weakened if algorithmic systems intensify surveillance, erode autonomy, or reduce workers to measurable outputs (Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Accordingly, AIAAL incorporates spiritual leadership and human flourishing not to explain AI risks directly, but to provide a normative anchor for preserving meaning, dignity, belonging, and well-being amid AI-enabled organizational change (Fry, 2003; Seligman, 2011). AI adoption should enhance human capability, well-being, learning, creativity, and meaningful participation, rather than merely increase efficiency or reduce labor costs.

Sixth, paradigm shift theory frames AI as a transformation that challenges the assumptions of existing leadership science. Kuhn (1996) argues that paradigms shift when existing theories cannot adequately explain emerging anomalies. AI presents such an anomaly because it introduces non-human intelligence into organizational cognition, decision-making, communication, and evaluation (Berente et al., 2021; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2019). Traditional leadership theories generally assume that leadership is a human-centered influence process. AI complicates this assumption by participating in sensemaking, analysis, prediction, recommendation, and control. AIAAL therefore proposes that AI leadership should be understood not merely as an extension of digital leadership, but as a new leadership paradigm for human–AI interdependence.

To sharpen its explanatory logic, AIAAL can be reduced to three core mechanisms. First, cognitive augmentation occurs when AI expands leaders' diagnostic, predictive, and sensemaking capacity (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). Second, adaptive disruption occurs when AI destabilizes expertise, roles, trust, identity, and accountability because people must renegotiate what remains distinctively human in decision-making (Kellogg et al., 2020; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Third, ethical-human governance occurs when leaders create the conditions under which AI-enabled decisions remain fair, explainable, accountable, and aligned with human dignity (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019). These three mechanisms clarify that AIAAL is not a descriptive collection of concepts, but an explanatory framework for how AI reshapes leadership practice.

Research Problem & Gaps

The central research problem is that existing leadership theories and AI management frameworks do not sufficiently explain how leaders can ethically and adaptively guide organizations through AI-intensive transformation. Although the AI leadership literature has expanded rapidly, it remains fragmented across technology management, information systems, organizational behavior, ethics, and leadership studies (Aziz et al., 2025; Berente et al., 2021; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). As a result, organizations often adopt AI faster than developing the leadership capabilities, governance systems, and cultural readiness required for responsible implementation (Davenport & Mittal, 2023; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018).

The first gap concerns the insufficient integration of adaptive leadership with AI leadership. AI research often emphasizes technical implementation, data strategy, automation, and productivity, while leadership research emphasizes influence, vision, motivation, ethics, and change (Davenport, 2018; Northouse, 2025). However, few frameworks explain how leaders should diagnose, interpret, and respond to AI-induced adaptive challenges. Transformational leadership may inspire a digital vision, but it does not fully address algorithmic opacity, role disruption, or human–machine accountability. Adaptive leadership provides a stronger foundation because it focuses on mobilizing people through uncertainty and value conflict (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009), but it must be extended to account for AI systems as active participants in organizational transformation.

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The first gap concerns the insufficient integration of adaptive leadership with AI leadership. AI research often emphasizes technical implementation, data strategy, automation, and productivity, while leadership research emphasizes influence, vision, motivation, ethics, and change (Davenport, 2018; Northouse, 2025). However, few frameworks explain how leaders should diagnose, interpret, and respond to AI-induced adaptive challenges. Transformational leadership may inspire a digital vision, but it does not fully address algorithmic opacity, role disruption, or human–machine accountability. Adaptive leadership provides a stronger foundation because it focuses on mobilizing people through uncertainty and value conflict (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009), but it must be extended to account for AI systems as active participants in organizational transformation.

The AIAAL framework distinguishes AI from broader digital transformation in one crucial respect. Unlike broader digital technologies that primarily extend communication, coordination, and process efficiency, AI systems classify, predict, recommend, generate, and learn from data, thereby participating in judgment-like organizational functions that raise distinctive questions of opacity, control, accountability, and human–machine complementarity (Berente et al., 2021; Faraj et al., 2018; Kellogg et al., 2020; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Therefore, the distinctive leadership challenge is not change management in general, but the governance of algorithmic participation in organizational judgment. This is why AIAAL focuses on augmented judgment, algorithmic accountability, and human–AI complementarity rather than digital transformation capability alone.

The second gap concerns the underdevelopment of human–AI collaboration as a leadership phenomenon. AI is often framed either as a tool that supports leaders or as a technology that threatens workers. Both views are incomplete. In practice, leaders must design the relationship between human and machine intelligence: when to rely on AI, when to challenge it, when to override it, how to communicate its use, and how to preserve accountability (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). The human–AI collaboration literature suggests that organizational performance depends on complementarity between machine intelligence and human judgment (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021), but the leadership practices required to cultivate such complementarity remain underdeveloped.

The third gap is the limited integration of ethical AI governance with leadership practice. Ethical AI literature has developed important principles such as fairness, accountability, transparency, explainability, privacy, and non-maleficence (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019). Yet these principles are often discussed as policy, compliance, or technical design issues rather than as leadership responsibilities. AIAAL argues that ethical AI governance requires leaders who can create organizational conditions for responsible AI use, including stakeholder participation, dissent protection, bias monitoring, transparent communication, and accountability structures (Floridi et al., 2018; Heifetz et al., 2009; Jobin et al., 2019).

The fourth gap concerns the neglect of meaning, identity, and human flourishing. AI leadership literature often focuses on performance, innovation, automation, and capability development (Davenport, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021; Sjödin et al., 2021). These outcomes are important, but they do not fully address the psychological and existential effects of AI on employees. AI can reshape professional identity, reduce perceived autonomy, alter expertise, and intensify fears of replacement (Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AIAAL therefore incorporates spiritual leadership and human flourishing to ensure that AI transformation remains anchored in dignity, purpose, belonging, and well-being (Fry, 2003; Seligman, 2011).

The fifth gap is methodological. Much AI leadership literature remains conceptual, normative, or technologically oriented. There remains a need for empirical research that captures how leaders experience AI in organizational settings (Aziz et al., 2025; Bahoo et al., 2023). The finalized dissertation addresses this gap through interpretivist qualitative inquiry and abductive thematic analysis, drawing on 32 AI leadership practitioners across technology and information, healthcare, financial services, education, and automotive sectors. This empirical grounding enables AIAAL to move beyond abstract theorizing toward a framework informed by lived leadership experience.

Research Objectives

The study has four research objectives, which are aimed at:
1. Investigate how AI augments core leadership behaviors.
2. Explore how leaders navigate AI-induced adaptive and technical challenges.
3. Identify competencies essential for AI-augmented adaptive leadership.
4. Conceptualize and develop the AIAAL theoretical framework.

The first objective is to investigate how AI augments core leadership behaviors in AI intensive organizational environments. This includes examining how AI supports diagnosis, forecasting, strategic decision-making, communication, coordination, stakeholder analysis, risk detection, and sensemaking (Davenport, 2018; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). AI can help leaders process large volumes of information, detect weak signals, generate alternative scenarios, and identify operational patterns that may otherwise remain invisible (Berente et al., 2021; Sjödin et al., 2021). However, AIAAL emphasizes that AI augmentation must remain governed by human judgment, ethical reasoning, and contextual interpretation (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021).

The second objective is to explore how leaders navigate AI-induced technical and adaptive challenges. Technical challenges include data quality, model accuracy, infrastructure readiness, cybersecurity, systems integration, and compliance (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018). Adaptive challenges include fear of displacement, ethical ambiguity, cultural resistance, role redesign, trust erosion, and accountability uncertainty (Heifetz et al., 2009; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AIAAL helps leaders distinguish these challenge types while recognizing that they often interact. For example, algorithmic bias may appear to be a technical issue of data and model design, but it is also an adaptive issue involving fairness, legitimacy, institutional trust, and social justice (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019).

The third objective is to identify the competencies required for AI-augmented adaptive leadership. These competencies include AI literacy, value and scenario management, systems thinking, ethical reasoning, emotional intelligence, psychological safety building, strategic foresight, stakeholder inclusion, collaborative problem-solving, and governance capability (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport, 2026; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Leaders do not need to become data scientists, but they must understand AI sufficiently to ask informed questions, challenge assumptions, interpret limitations, and prevent blind reliance on algorithmic outputs (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport & Ronanki, 2018). They must also create environments in which employees can learn, experiment, raise concerns, and participate in AI-enabled change (Heifetz et al., 2009; Seligman, 2011).

The fourth objective is to conceptualize and develop the AIAAL theoretical framework. This framework synthesizes adaptive leadership, AI augmentation, sociotechnical systems, spiritual leadership, human flourishing, ethical AI governance, and paradigm shift theory into a coherent leadership model (Fry, 2003; Heifetz, 1994; Kuhn, 1996; Seligman, 2011; Trist & Bamforth, 1951). It positions AI as a cognitive amplifier, an adaptive disruptor, and a sociotechnical partner. It also identifies leadership practices that enable responsible AI transformation, including diagnosing adaptive versus technical work, regulating disequilibrium, protecting human voice, building ethical governance, and aligning AI adoption with human flourishing (Floridi et al., 2018; Heifetz et al., 2009; Jobin et al., 2019).

Methodology

The study adopts an interpretivist qualitative research design. This approach is appropriate because AI leadership is an emerging, complex, and socially constructed phenomenon that requires attention to meaning, context, interpretation, and lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2022). Rather than testing a predetermined causal model, the study seeks to understand how leaders make sense of AI, how they experience its opportunities and risks, and how they adapt leadership practices in response to algorithmic transformation. Interpretivist inquiry is therefore suitable for examining leadership in AI intensive contexts where ambiguity, ethical tension, and organizational meaning are central.

The dissertation uses abductive thematic analysis to develop theory through iterative movement between empirical data and existing theoretical constructs. Abduction is particularly suitable for emerging phenomena because it enables researchers to move between surprising observations and plausible theoretical explanations (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Thematic analysis provides a systematic method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Together, these methods support the development of an empirically grounded yet theoretically informed AIAAL framework.

The empirical design includes semi-structured interviews with 32 AI leadership practitioners across five AI-intensive sectors: technology and information, healthcare, financial services, education, and automotive industries. The sample captures both expert and practitioner perspectives, allowing the study to compare conceptual, strategic, and operational understandings of AI leadership. Maximum variation sampling supports breadth across roles, industries, and organizational contexts (Creswell & Poth, 2022). This cross sectoral approach is important because AI leadership challenges vary significantly across domains. Healthcare leaders may emphasize patient dignity, diagnostic safety, and clinical trust; financial leaders may focus on compliance, fraud detection, and accountability; education leaders may address equity, academic integrity, and personalized learning; automotive leaders may confront automation safety and human-machine coordination; and technology leaders may face innovation speed, product ethics, and platform governance.

The analysis follows a hybrid abductive logic. Initial coding remains open to participants' language, meanings, and experiences. Subsequent coding connects emergent patterns to adaptive leadership, AI augmentation, sociotechnical systems, ethical AI, and spiritual leadership. This process allows the study to preserve empirical nuance while building a coherent theoretical contribution (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Gioia et al., 2013; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012). Trustworthiness is strengthened through reflexive memoing, audit trails, cross case comparison, triangulation with secondary data, and attention to credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2022).

Ethical considerations are central to the methodology. Because AI leadership involves sensitive issues such as automation, surveillance, bias, accountability, workforce displacement, and organizational control, the research design emphasizes informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, participant autonomy, non-maleficence, fairness, and integrity (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019). These ethical principles mirror the commitments of AIAAL itself. The study therefore not only investigates ethical AI leadership but also enacts ethical qualitative research practice.

Contributions

The AIAAL framework makes theoretical, methodological, and practical contributions. Theoretically, AIAAL extends adaptive leadership theory into AI-intensive organizational contexts. Adaptive leadership has traditionally focused on human systems confronting complex change (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz et al., 2009). AIAAL updates this theory by recognizing that AI systems now participate in diagnosis, decision support, monitoring, communication, forecasting, and organizational learning (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport, 2018; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). This creates a hybrid leadership context in which adaptive work must be performed through human–AI interaction.

Second, the framework contributes to AI leadership literature by offering an integrated model that goes beyond technological adoption. Many organizations treat AI transformation as a matter of infrastructure, data strategy, software implementation, and digital skills (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021). AIAAL argues that AI transformation also requires ethical judgment, cultural adaptation, trust-building, psychological safety, and human-centered purpose (Floridi et al., 2018; Fry, 2003; Heifetz et al., 2009; Seligman, 2011). In this sense, the framework shifts attention from "How can leaders implement AI?" to "How can leaders mobilize human and organizational adaptation in the presence of AI?"

Third, AIAAL contributes to ethical AI scholarship by translating ethical principles into leadership practices. Principles such as fairness, accountability, transparency, explainability, privacy, and non-maleficence are essential, but they must be enacted through organizational routines, communication, and leadership behavior (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019). Leaders must ask who benefits from AI, who may be harmed, whose voice is excluded, how algorithmic decisions are explained, and how accountability is preserved. AIAAL therefore bridges the gap between abstract ethical principles and daily leadership action.

Fourth, the framework contributes to human-centered management by foregrounding dignity and flourishing. AI adoption can produce efficiency, innovation, and strategic advantage, but it can also generate anxiety, deskilling, surveillance, and alienation (Bengio et al., 2024; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). AIAAL insists that responsible AI leadership must evaluate AI not only by productivity and performance metrics, but also by its effects on meaning, autonomy, trust, learning, inclusion, and well-being (Fry, 2003; Seligman, 2011). This contribution is particularly important as organizations increasingly use AI to measure, predict, and influence employee behavior.

Fifth, the study contributes methodologically by using abductive qualitative theory building in a field often dominated by technical, quantitative, or conceptual analysis. By drawing on interviews with 32 AI leadership practitioners, the dissertation grounds AIAAL in lived experience while maintaining strong theoretical scaffolding. This gives the framework both practical relevance and conceptual rigor (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2022; Gioia et al., 2013; Timmermans & Tavory, 2012).

Practically, AIAAL offers a leadership competency model for AI-intensive organizations. Leaders need AI literacy to understand capabilities and limitations; ethical reasoning to evaluate risks and responsibilities; systems thinking to understand organizational interdependence; emotional intelligence to address fear and resistance; and adaptive capacity to mobilize learning under uncertainty (Davenport, 2018; Heifetz et al., 2009; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021; Northouse, 2025). They also need governance capability to establish responsible AI processes, including stakeholder consultation, bias monitoring, transparency protocols, escalation mechanisms, and accountability structures (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019).

Significance

The significance of this study lies in its response to one of the most consequential leadership problems of the contemporary era: how to preserve human agency, dignity, and ethical responsibility while using increasingly powerful AI systems. AI promises major benefits, including improved decision-making, productivity, personalization, innovation, and scientific discovery (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2017; Davenport, 2018; Mikalef & Gupta, 2021; Sjödin et al., 2021). Yet it also introduces serious risks, including bias, opacity, dependency, misinformation, surveillance, labor displacement, workplace control, and loss of human control (Bengio et al., 2024; Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019; Kellogg et al., 2020). These tensions make AI leadership one of the most urgent scholarly and practical challenges of the algorithmic era.

AIAAL is significant because it avoids both technological determinism and technological rejection. It does not assume that AI will automatically improve leadership, nor does it treat AI only as a threat. Instead, it offers a balanced framework for responsible augmentation. AI can strengthen leadership when it expands insight, supports learning, enhances foresight, and enables more informed decisions (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). However, AI can weaken leadership when it displaces judgment, obscures accountability, intensifies control, or undermines human dignity (Floridi et al., 2018; Jobin et al., 2019). The leader's role is therefore to govern the relationship between human and machine intelligence.

The framework is also significant for leadership development. Future leaders will need to learn how to collaborate with AI, interpret algorithmic outputs, challenge automated recommendations, design ethical governance, and support employees through AI-induced disruption (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport, 2018; Heifetz et al., 2009). These capabilities are becoming core leadership competencies in AI-intensive organizations. AIAAL provides a conceptual foundation for executive education, doctoral research, leadership development, and organizational AI governance.

AIAAL is not proposed as a universal theory for all organizations. Its primary boundary condition is AI intensity. The framework is most applicable where AI materially affects decision-making, professional expertise, work design, stakeholder trust, governance, or strategic transformation. It is therefore most relevant to AI-intensive sectors such as technology, finance, healthcare, education, automotive, consulting, and data-driven public services. In organizations where digital tools improve communication or efficiency but do not meaningfully participate in judgment, traditional adaptive or digital leadership theories may be sufficient. AIAAL becomes necessary when leaders must mobilize human adaptation while simultaneously governing machine-generated cognition, recommendation, and control.

Finally, the study is significant because it reframes AI leadership as a human-centered adaptive practice. The ultimate purpose of AI leadership should not be automation for its own sake, nor productivity detached from people. Rather, AI should be used to support sustainable value creation, responsible innovation, and human flourishing (Fry, 2003; Seligman, 2011). In this way, AIAAL contributes to a more ethical, adaptive, and human-centered future of leadership.

Conclusion

The AI-Augmented Adaptive Leadership framework offers a timely and interdisciplinary response to the leadership void created by rapid AI transformation. Grounded in adaptive leadership theory and enriched by AI augmentation literature, sociotechnical systems thinking, spiritual leadership, positive psychology, ethical AI governance, and paradigm shift theory, AIAAL provides a framework for leading responsibly in algorithmic environments (Fry, 2003; Heifetz et al., 2009; Kuhn, 1996; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021; Seligman, 2011; Trist & Bamforth, 1951).

The framework's central claim is that AI must be understood simultaneously as an augmentation partner, an adaptive challenge, and a sociotechnical actor within organizational systems. AI can enhance leadership cognition, decision-making, foresight, and coordination, but it also disrupts values, roles, trust, identity, and accountability (Berente et al., 2021; Davenport, 2018; Floridi et al., 2018; Raisch & Krakowski, 2021). Leaders must therefore develop the capacity to distinguish technical from adaptive work, regulate disequilibrium, protect human voice, give work back to people, build psychological safety, and align AI adoption with ethical and human-centered purposes (Floridi et al., 2018; Heifetz et al., 2009; Jobin et al., 2019).

As organizations move deeper into AI-intensive futures, leadership must evolve beyond traditional human-only models. The future of leadership will be shaped by the ability to lead with AI, through AI, and beyond AI. In this sense, AIAAL's contribution is bounded and specific: it explains how adaptive leadership must evolve when the work of diagnosis, prediction, recommendation, and control is partly delegated to intelligent systems. The framework therefore advances adaptive leadership theory by specifying the AI-era mechanisms through which leaders preserve human agency, ethical accountability, and collective learning under conditions of algorithmic transformation. AIAAL contributes to this evolution by offering a theoretically grounded and empirically informed model for ethical, adaptive, and human-centered AI transformation.

Keywords: *AI-augmented adaptive leadership; artificial intelligence; adaptive leadership; AI leadership; human–AI collaboration; ethical AI governance; sociotechnical systems theory; spiritual leadership; human flourishing; algorithmic decision-making; interdisciplinary leadership theory; human-centered AI.*

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