



# The Algorithm of Affluence: Digital Media, Spectacular Wealth, and the Transformation of Work Ethic in Nigeria's Public Sphere

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## ABSTRACT

## Original Research Article

The rapid expansion of digital platforms in Nigeria has intensified the public performance of wealth, transforming affluence into an algorithmically amplified spectacle. Across Instagram, TikTok, and X, luxury lifestyles are curated and circulated at scale, generating aspirational narratives that increasingly structure Nigeria's digital public sphere. While global scholarship has examined digital capitalism and influencer culture, limited attention has been paid to how algorithmic amplification of conspicuous wealth intersects with locally embedded moral economies in socio-economically precarious contexts.

This study investigates how digitally mediated affluence is represented, amplified, and interpreted in Nigeria and how such representations may be recalibrating perceptions of work ethic and legitimacy. Adopting a qualitative-dominant mixed-method design, the research integrates critical discourse analysis of high-engagement wealth-centered content, semi-structured interviews with journalists, media scholars and youth audiences and systematic observation of engagement metrics as proxies for algorithmic visibility.

Findings reveal four interrelated dynamics: (1) wealth operates as staged spectacle optimized for engagement; (2) platform infrastructures structurally privilege such spectacle through amplification loops; (3) success narratives frequently compress financial timelines, foregrounding visible outcomes while marginalizing incremental labor; and (4) digital visibility increasingly functions as a parallel marker of legitimacy. Rather than evidencing moral collapse, the data indicate normative tension in which traditional values of diligence and communal respectability coexist with visibility-driven standards of achievement.

The study advances the concept of *algorithmic moral reordering* to describe how engagement-optimized infrastructures recalibrate symbolic hierarchies within digitally mediated societies. By situating the analysis in Nigeria, it contributes to de-Westernizing digital media scholarship and underscores digital platforms as value-shaping institutions within emerging public spheres.

**Keywords:** Algorithmic Visibility, Digital Spectacle, Moral Economy, Work Ethic, Platform Capitalism, Public Sphere, Nigeria.

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## Introduction

### Background

The expansion of digital platforms has reconfigured the architecture of public visibility in contemporary societies.

Social media environments such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and X have transformed communication from an institutionally mediated system into an algorithmically structured ecosystem in which visibility functions as a form of currency. Within this environment, attention is monetized,

engagement is quantified and prominence is determined less by traditional editorial gatekeepers than by computational systems optimized for retention and advertising revenue. In what is increasingly described as a visibility economy, prominence accrues not merely to information but to spectacle content that elicits affect, aspiration and rapid circulation.

Nigeria provides a particularly significant site for examining these dynamics. As Africa's most populous country and one of its fastest-growing digital markets, Nigeria has witnessed rapid growth in smartphone penetration, broadband access and social media adoption. Digital platforms now shape political discourse, cultural expression and economic imagination. Within this mediated landscape, influencer culture has emerged as a powerful communicative force. Entrepreneurs, entertainers, political elites and digital personalities routinely curate and circulate images of luxury consumption, designer fashion, high-end vehicles, elite networks and transnational mobility. These displays are rarely incidental; they are strategically staged within platform architectures that reward engagement intensity and aesthetic immediacy.

The rise of influencer culture in Nigeria reflects broader dynamics of digital capitalism, in which personal branding and lifestyle performance become convertible into economic value. Yet in contexts characterized by economic inequality, youth unemployment and precarious labor markets, the hyper-visibility of spectacular wealth acquires heightened socio-cultural significance. Affluence becomes a publicly circulated narrative rather than a private status marker. Algorithmic systems, designed to prioritize visually striking and emotionally resonant content, disproportionately amplify such performances. In this environment, spectacle is not simply visible, it is infrastructurally advantaged.

These developments raise foundational questions for media and communication scholarship. Historically, journalism and public discourse in Nigeria have reinforced normative frameworks emphasizing diligence, integrity, communal reputation and honest livelihood. The press has functioned not only as watchdog but also as moral commentator, shaping societal understandings of legitimate mobility. In algorithm-driven media systems, however, value hierarchies may be subtly reorganized. When wealth is repeatedly framed as immediate, glamorous and detached from visible labor, the communicative meaning of success shifts. Prosperity becomes aestheticized; process becomes obscured.

What may be termed the "algorithm of affluence" thus demands systematic inquiry. Unlike classical forms of conspicuous consumption analyzed in earlier sociological traditions, contemporary displays of wealth are embedded within infrastructures that computationally rank, recommend, and amplify content. Visibility is engineered rather than evenly distributed. Digital platforms therefore do not merely reflect aspirations; they actively participate in shaping them.

Within Nigeria's evolving public sphere, this dynamic carries implications for how work ethic, legitimacy, and social worth are symbolically constructed.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates how the algorithmic amplification of spectacular wealth in Nigeria's digital ecosystem contributes to transformations in the communicative meaning of success. It examines how affluence is framed and circulated, how audiences interpret these mediated performances and how such representations interact with longstanding moral frameworks centered on diligence and earned reputation. By situating the Nigerian case within broader debates on digital spectacle, algorithmic governance, and moral economy, the study foregrounds the role of media infrastructures in the reordering of value hierarchies.

In doing so, the research conceptualizes digital platforms not as neutral conduits of expression but as value-shaping institutions within Nigeria's public sphere. The heightened display of wealth is therefore examined as a communicative phenomenon embedded within algorithmic systems, one that may be recalibrating the moral architecture of aspiration in an age of computational visibility.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The proliferation of digitally staged affluence in Nigeria signals more than a shift in lifestyle aesthetics; it reflects a transformation in how success and legitimacy are communicatively constructed. Across social networking platforms, conspicuous consumption is normalized through recurring displays of luxury goods, elite networks, transnational mobility and high-value transactions. These performances are no longer confined to global celebrities but are enacted by political elites, emerging entrepreneurs, entertainers and self-branded digital personalities whose content circulates widely within algorithmically curated feeds.

This proliferation occurs within a socio-economic landscape marked by high youth unemployment, widening inequality and unstable labor markets. In such conditions, mediated representations of accelerated prosperity may acquire amplified symbolic power. When success is visually equated with visible excess, the criteria for evaluating achievement risk being recalibrated. Engagement-maximizing algorithms disproportionately privilege visually striking and emotionally charged content, enabling luxury-centered narratives to outperform representations of gradual advancement or disciplined labor.

The concern, therefore, is not the existence of wealth display per se, but its communicative framing and infrastructural amplification. When affluence is aestheticized without contextual narratives of process, learning, or sustained effort, the labor underpinning prosperity becomes symbolically invisible. This invisibility may destabilize value systems historically centered on hard work, good name, and

communal respectability. In Nigeria's contemporary visibility economy, validation is increasingly quantified through followers, metrics, and algorithmic reach.

These shifts raise pressing questions. To what extent do digital infrastructures contribute to recalibrating societal aspirations? Does algorithmic privileging of spectacle normalize compressed financial timelines? How might such representations influence youth identity formation and perceptions of legitimate mobility within Nigeria's public sphere?

While scholarship has examined influencer culture, digital capitalism and conspicuous consumption, limited empirical work has explored how algorithmic amplification of wealth intersects with transformations in work ethic within African contexts. This lacuna is particularly significant in Nigeria, where media institutions have historically shaped civic and moral discourse.

This study addresses that gap by examining the intersection of digital infrastructure, symbolic representation, and moral economy. It investigates whether the algorithmic elevation of spectacular wealth contributes to the normalization of hyper-consumption and the recalibration of values centered on diligence, integrity and earned reputation. By conceptualizing conspicuous affluence as communicatively embedded within computational visibility systems, the study advances a critical inquiry into how media architectures participate in reshaping work ethic in Nigeria's contemporary public sphere.

### Research Objectives

This study undertakes a multi-layered inquiry into how digital media infrastructures shape contemporary understandings of wealth and work in Nigeria. It pursues three interrelated objectives operating across infrastructural, representational and interpretive levels.

First, it examines how digital platforms amplify spectacular displays of wealth within Nigeria's algorithmically structured public sphere. This objective focuses on the mechanisms of visibility embedded in engagement-driven architectures and investigates how luxury-centered content attains disproportionate prominence.

Second, it analyzes how algorithmic amplification constructs narratives of success. Through discourse and framing analysis, the study interrogates how mediated representations of affluence encode implicit timelines, notions of legitimacy and aspirational benchmarks often privileging immediacy and consumption over process and labor.

Third, it investigates perceived transformations in work ethic in relation to these mediated narratives. Drawing on audience perspectives, particularly among youth navigating economic precarity, the study explores whether exposure to hyper-visible affluence influences perceptions of diligence, legitimacy and pathways to prosperity.

Collectively, these objectives position digital platforms as value-shaping environments whose algorithmic logics structure public imaginaries of success. The study thus contributes to broader debates on digital capitalism, visibility economies, and the transformation of normative frameworks within contemporary public spheres.

### Research Questions

Guided by these objectives, the study addresses the following questions:

**RQ1:** How do digital algorithms privilege wealth-centered content within Nigeria's media ecosystem?

**RQ2:** What symbolic meanings of success are constructed and communicated through mediated displays of affluence?

**RQ3:** How do audiences interpret and negotiate these algorithmically amplified representations of wealth in relation to work ethic and legitimacy?

Together, these questions structure a multi-level analysis of the "algorithm of affluence", integrating infrastructural dynamics, symbolic construction, and audience interpretation. Through this framework, the study advances an empirically grounded understanding of how digital media environments may be participating in the transformation of work ethic and moral valuation in contemporary Nigerian society.

## Literature Review

### Conspicuous Consumption and Spectacle

The public display of wealth as a mechanism of social differentiation has long been central to sociological and cultural theory. Veblen's (1899/1994) concept of conspicuous consumption established that visible expenditure functions as a communicative act through which elites signal distinction and secure social recognition. Luxury goods, in this formulation, operate less as utilitarian objects than as symbolic markers of prestige. Subsequent scholarship extended this insight by demonstrating that consumption operates as a cultural language through which hierarchy is articulated and reproduced (Douglas & Isherwood, 1979; Belk, 1988).

Digital media environments intensify the dynamics Veblen identified by exponentially expanding the scale and velocity of visibility (Marwick, 2015; Abidin, 2016). Social networking platforms collapse social boundaries and enable wealth performances to circulate across heterogeneous audiences, a phenomenon Marwick and Boyd (2011) describe as "context collapse." In such environments, conspicuous consumption is no longer merely socially observable; it becomes algorithmically structured and engagement-optimized (Gillespie, 2014; Bucher, 2018). Display is thus embedded within infrastructural systems that reward spectacle.

Debord's (1967/1994) theory of the society of the spectacle offers a complementary perspective. Debord conceptualized

spectacle as a condition in which social relations are mediated through images and appearances. In late capitalism, he argued, representation displaces lived experience, and legitimacy becomes tied to visibility. Contemporary scholars have extended this thesis to digital contexts, arguing that platforms intensify the aestheticization of everyday life and commodify visibility itself (Kellner, 2003; Couldry, 2012; Jurgenson, 2019). Within algorithmically curated environments, visually extravagant and emotionally resonant content such as luxury display aligns with platform incentives favoring engagement intensity (Tufekci, 2015; Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018).

Bourdieu's (1984) concept of symbolic capital further clarifies how economic resources acquire social legitimacy through recognition. Luxury goods function as markers of distinction, reinforcing class boundaries (Lamont & Lareau, 1988). In digital ecosystems, symbolic capital becomes intertwined with quantifiable metrics, followers, likes, shares and verification markers (Marwick, 2013; Hearn, 2010). Influencer economies convert visibility into reputational authority, which is subsequently monetized (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017). Thus, conspicuous consumption in digital environments is inseparable from algorithmically mediated prestige accumulation.

These dynamics operate within what has been termed the attention economy (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Citton, 2017). Algorithms privilege content that generates measurable interaction, frequently amplifying aspirational and visually extravagant imagery (Bucher, 2018; Napoli, 2019). As Gillespie (2018) notes, platform governance shapes hierarchies of attention, influencing what becomes socially salient. Wealth-centered content, therefore, often achieves disproportionate prominence relative to representations of incremental labor or vocational discipline.

While global scholarship has theorized spectacle and digital capitalism extensively (Debord, 1967/1994; Srnicek, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018), empirical examination of how these dynamics intersect with transformations in work ethic within African public spheres remains limited. Nigerian scholarship has examined media political economy and youth digital culture (Oso, 2012; Akinfemisoye, 2020), yet the specific linkage between algorithmically amplified affluence and normative shifts in perceptions of diligence and legitimacy remains underdeveloped. This study builds upon classical and contemporary theories to examine spectacular wealth as a communicative phenomenon embedded within computational infrastructures of visibility.

### **Digital Capitalism and Influencer Culture**

The prominence of digital affluence must be situated within the structural logic of platform capitalism. Contemporary media scholars argue that digital platforms operate as infrastructures of data extraction, behavioral prediction and

attention monetization (Fuchs, 2014; Srnicek, 2017; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Unlike legacy media systems organized around editorial gatekeeping, platform ecosystems curate visibility through engagement-driven algorithms (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018). User interaction generates data, which becomes both commodity and governance mechanism (Zuboff, 2019).

Within this model, attention constitutes the central economic resource (Citton, 2017). Content generating heightened interaction—likes, comments, watch time, is algorithmically rewarded with further visibility (Tufekci, 2015). This recursive amplification privileges spectacle and emotional intensity, often at the expense of deliberative or process-oriented content (Napoli, 2019). Visually striking displays of wealth are therefore structurally advantaged within platform architectures.

Influencer culture exemplifies this logic. Scholars describe influencers as entrepreneurial self-brands who strategically align personal identity with platform metrics (Marwick, 2013; Abidin, 2016; Khamis, Ang, & Welling, 2017). Lifestyle performance becomes a mechanism for accumulating both economic and symbolic capital. Abidin (2016) demonstrates how influencers cultivate aspirational authenticity, blending relatability with luxury aesthetics to sustain engagement. Duffy (2017) similarly highlights the precarious labor underlying aspirational self-branding, even when economic realities are obscured.

Visibility in such contexts functions as currency (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Prestige becomes quantifiable through metrics, transforming symbolic capital into measurable digital indicators (Van Dijck, 2013). Algorithms thus participate in constructing hierarchies of recognition (Gillespie, 2018). The prominence of spectacular affluence online cannot be understood purely as audience preference; it is co-produced by infrastructural systems optimized for engagement.

In African contexts, these dynamics intersect with socio-economic precarity. Wasserman (2018) argues that African digital publics operate at the intersection of global platform capitalism and local structural inequalities. Youth unemployment and constrained formal labor markets may intensify the aspirational appeal of influencer culture (Nyamnjoh, 2015; Aririguzoh, 2020). Nigerian scholarship documents the rise of digital entrepreneurship and lifestyle branding (Akinfemisoye, 2020; Adeiza, 2022), yet systematic analysis of how algorithmic amplification shapes moral valuation remains sparse.

By integrating digital capitalism and influencer scholarship, this study conceptualizes spectacular wealth as structurally embedded within monetized visibility systems. In Nigeria's platform-mediated public sphere, affluence is not merely performed, it is infrastructurally advantaged.

## Media Representation and Moral Economy

Media representation plays a central role in shaping social norms and value hierarchies. Hall (1997) argues that representation is constitutive: media do not merely reflect reality but participate in its construction. Through selection and repetition, certain narratives become normalized (Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Framing theory illuminates how success is narratively structured. Frames highlight dimensions of reality while obscuring others (Scheufele, 1999). In representations of affluence, emphasis may be placed on luxury, exclusivity, and immediacy while minimizing labor or structural constraints. Research demonstrates that framing influences public interpretations of economic legitimacy and mobility (Iyengar, 1991; Kendall, 2011).

In algorithmically curated environments, emotionally engaging frames are more likely to be amplified (Tufekci, 2015). Platform metrics therefore interact with framing processes, privileging spectacle-driven narratives (Napoli, 2019). The communicative construction of success becomes co-shaped by commercial incentives.

Moral economy scholarship further clarifies these implications. Silverstone (2007) argues that media operate as sites of moral negotiation. Couldry and Hepp (2017) similarly emphasize media's role in shaping normative orders. Repeated valorization of hyper-consumption may recalibrate evaluative frameworks, privileging visibility over vocational discipline. Bauman's (2007) concept of liquid modernity suggests that consumerist identity may displace stable notions of long-term effort.

In Nigeria, public debates surrounding wealth, legitimacy, and digital lifestyles illustrate emerging moral contestation (Aririguzoh, 2020). Yet systematic empirical investigation into how algorithmically amplified affluence intersects with work ethic remains limited. This study extends moral economy scholarship into the domain of platform-mediated spectacle.

## African and Nigerian Context

Nigeria's socio-economic and cultural landscape provides critical context. The country's youthful demographic profile is accompanied by persistent unemployment and underemployment (NBS, 2023; World Bank, 2022). Scholars note that economic precarity shapes aspirational orientations and encourages alternative imaginaries of success (Honwana, 2012; Adebayo, 2020).

Historically, Nigerian socio-cultural systems have emphasized diligence, integrity, and communal reputation as markers of legitimate achievement (Ekeh, 1975; Falola & Heaton, 2008). Media institutions reinforced these values through narratives celebrating perseverance and civic

responsibility (Oso, 2012). Visible wealth without credible narrative grounding often attracted suspicion (Smith, 2007).

However, globalization and neoliberal consumerism have reshaped normative orientations (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2000; Bauman, 2007). Digital platforms intensify this shift by privileging individual display over communal validation (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Rapid growth in social media adoption (NCC, 2023) has positioned Nigeria as a vibrant digital public sphere shaped by global platform capitalism (Wasserman, 2018).

Influencer economies operate within these structural tensions. Digital entrepreneurship offers alternative pathways to visibility (Adeiza, 2022), yet widespread precarity heightens the symbolic power of spectacular affluence (Aririguzoh, 2020). Despite this, the normative implications for work ethic remain insufficiently theorized. Nigeria therefore represents a critical site for examining how algorithmic spectacle interacts with culturally embedded moral frameworks.

## Identified Gap

The literature demonstrates robust theorization of:

- Conspicuous consumption and spectacle (Veblen, 1899/1994; Debord, 1967/1994)
- Symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984)
- Platform capitalism and algorithmic governance (Srnicek, 2017; Bucher, 2018)
- Influencer branding and aspirational culture (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017)
- Nigerian digital media and youth engagement (Akinfemisoye, 2020)

However, three critical gaps persist.

First, limited empirical work examines how algorithmic systems privilege wealth-centered content in African digital ecosystems beyond political communication studies.

Second, insufficient research connects digital spectacle with locally embedded moral economies in Nigeria.

Third, existing scholarship rarely links algorithmic amplification of affluence to transformations in perceptions of work ethic and legitimacy within precarious socio-economic contexts.

This study integrates these strands by examining:

1. Algorithmic amplification within platform capitalism
2. Spectacular wealth representation in digital media
3. Perceived transformations in work ethic within Nigeria's moral economy

Empirically, it provides context-specific analysis of Nigeria's digital public sphere. Theoretically, it extends classical consumption and spectacle theories into algorithmically governed environments. Normatively, it interrogates how digital infrastructures may participate in reshaping value hierarchies.

## Theoretical Framework

This study integrates three complementary theoretical traditions:

1. Political Economy of Digital Media,
2. The Algorithmic Public Sphere
3. Symbolic Interactionism and Moral Economy.

Together, these frameworks enable a multi-level analysis of the “algorithm of affluence”, structurally (how platforms privilege content), institutionally (how visibility reorganizes power), and interpretively (how audiences construct meaning and normative evaluation).

### Political Economy of Digital Media

This study is anchored in the political economy of communication, a tradition concerned with how media systems are shaped by ownership structures, economic power, and capitalist imperatives (Mosco, 2009; McChesney, 2008). Rather than conceptualizing digital platforms as neutral technologies, political economy treats them as profit-oriented infrastructures embedded within global systems of digital capitalism. This perspective is essential for understanding why spectacular wealth becomes disproportionately visible within Nigeria’s digital public sphere.

### Platforms as Profit-Driven Infrastructures

Political economy scholarship emphasizes that media institutions operate within revenue-dependent markets (Golding & Murdock, 1991). In the contemporary digital ecosystem, corporations such as Meta, Google, and TikTok function primarily as data-driven advertising intermediaries (Srnicek, 2017; Van Dijck, Poell, & de Waal, 2018). Their core business model revolves around extracting behavioral data and monetizing user attention through targeted advertising (Fuchs, 2014; Zuboff, 2019).

Srnicek (2017) characterizes this configuration as platform capitalism: infrastructures that facilitate interaction while converting data flows into profit-generating assets. Algorithmic personalization replaces traditional broadcast scheduling, ranking content according to predicted engagement likelihood (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018). In such systems, visibility is structured around retention optimization rather than civic deliberation.

Consequently, the prominence of wealth-centered content cannot be explained solely by cultural fascination. Algorithmic systems embed commercial priorities into hierarchies of exposure (Gillespie, 2014, 2018). Content that evokes strong emotional reactions admiration, aspiration, envy—tends to produce higher interaction metrics, thereby increasing algorithmic ranking (Tufekci, 2015; Napoli, 2019). Spectacular affluence aligns closely with these engagement logics.

In Nigeria, where digital platforms increasingly mediate public communication (Wasserman, 2018), global profit-

driven infrastructures intersect with local socio-economic precarity. The political economy framework therefore situates the “algorithm of affluence” within structural incentives embedded in platform design, rather than treating it as a purely cultural trend.

### The Attention Economy and Monetization

Closely linked to platform capitalism is the concept of the attention economy, which conceptualizes human attention as a scarce and commodifiable resource (Davenport & Beck, 2001; Citton, 2017). In contexts of information abundance, platforms compete to capture and retain user engagement, translating interaction into advertising revenue (Napoli, 2019).

This commodification reshapes communicative hierarchies by privileging content that is visually salient, emotionally stimulating, and easily shareable (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Scholars argue that such systems systematically reward spectacle over deliberation (Tufekci, 2015; Fuchs, 2014). Influencer economies further intensify this dynamic, as visibility metrics directly determine monetization opportunities (Abidin, 2016; Duffy, 2017).

Luxury imagery, exotic travel, designer fashion, high-end automobiles, possesses high aesthetic salience and aspirational appeal, characteristics strongly correlated with engagement performance (Marwick, 2015; Bucher, 2018). Algorithmic amplification operates recursively: high engagement yields increased exposure, which generates further engagement (Gillespie, 2018). As Napoli (2019) notes, engagement metrics thereby function as implicit editorial criteria.

From a political economy standpoint, the visibility of spectacular wealth is structurally incentivized. It reflects the convergence of data extraction, engagement optimization, and advertising monetization. Understanding these dynamics is foundational for analyzing how digitally amplified affluence may influence normative frameworks surrounding work and legitimacy in Nigeria.

### Algorithmic Public Sphere

While political economy illuminates structural incentives, the concept of the algorithmic public sphere explains how computational systems reorganize communicative power and visibility.

Drawing on Habermas’s (1989) conception of the public sphere and contemporary scholarship on algorithmic governance (Gillespie, 2018; Bucher, 2018), this framework conceptualizes digital platforms as arenas in which discourse is mediated through automated systems of ranking and recommendation.

### Visibility and Power

Classical public sphere theory emphasized rational-critical debate relatively insulated from state and market domination

(Habermas, 1989). However, scholars have long observed that commercial mass media embedded discourse within economic imperatives (Curran, 2002; Dahlgren, 2005). In algorithmically structured environments, visibility itself becomes computationally mediated.

Couldry (2012) argues that media institutions operate as centers of symbolic power, determining what becomes socially salient. In digital contexts, this symbolic authority is embedded within platform architectures that program visibility (Bucher, 2018). Algorithms do not merely distribute content; they rank, filter, and prioritize according to engagement predictions (Gillespie, 2014).

Visibility therefore constitutes a form of power. Platform design embeds value hierarchies into ranking systems (Van Dijck, 2013). Tufekci (2015) demonstrates that algorithmic amplification frequently elevates emotionally provocative content, distorting deliberative balance. Spectacular displays of wealth, visually compelling and aspirational, align with such amplification logics.

The algorithmic public sphere thus differs from traditional editorial systems. Professional gatekeeping is partially displaced by predictive analytics (Napoli, 2019). Computational systems become arbiters of relevance, shaping which narratives achieve prominence (Gillespie, 2018).

In Nigeria, where social media platforms function as primary sites of discourse (Wasserman, 2018), algorithmic ranking significantly influences public imagination. Repeated prominence of wealth-centered content may elevate it from entertainment to perceived normative standard.

### **Platform Governance**

Algorithmic visibility operates within broader regimes of corporate governance. Platforms regulate speech through moderation policies, monetization rules, and ranking systems (Gorwa, 2019; Gillespie, 2018). Unlike state regulation, platform governance is transnational and commercially driven (Van Dijck et al., 2018).

Suzor (2019) characterizes platforms as private governors of digital life. Their governance priorities are typically guided by advertiser compatibility and engagement sustainability rather than democratic deliberation. While misinformation and hate speech may trigger regulatory intervention, luxury display and lifestyle spectacle remain commercially compatible.

This selective governance contributes to a communicative environment in which aspirational affluence circulates with minimal structural critique. Engagement metrics become proxies for public interest, and algorithmic amplification substitutes for normative editorial judgment.

In socio-economic contexts marked by precarity, such as Nigeria, the implications extend beyond visibility. Platform governance shapes symbolic hierarchies of legitimacy and achievement. Repeated algorithmic elevation of spectacular

wealth may recalibrate perceptions of effort, authenticity, and success within the public sphere.

### **Symbolic Interactionism and Moral Economy**

Structural amplification alone does not determine social meaning. To understand how digitally mediated affluence influences work ethic, it is necessary to examine interpretive processes. Symbolic interactionism and moral economy provide this dimension.

### **Meaning-Making through Media Representations**

Symbolic interactionism posits that social reality is constructed through shared symbols and interpretive processes (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Individuals act based on meanings negotiated through interaction rather than responding directly to stimuli.

Media representations function as symbolic resources within this process (Hall, 1980; Couldry, 2012). Hall's encoding/decoding model underscores that audiences may interpret content in dominant, negotiated, or oppositional ways. Spectacular affluence is therefore not passively absorbed; it is socially interpreted.

However, repetition influences symbolic salience. Gerbner et al. (1986) demonstrate that repeated exposure cultivates shared perceptions of social reality. When wealth-centered imagery dominates digital feeds, it may acquire normative weight through ubiquity.

Symbolic interactionism directs attention to how Nigerian audiences interpret digitally amplified affluence. Is it decoded as entrepreneurial success, corruption, divine favor or algorithmic luck? These interpretations shape understandings of legitimacy and effort.

### **Moral Economy and the Communicative Construction of Success**

Moral economy foregrounds the normative frameworks governing economic life (Thompson, 1971; Scott, 1976). In media studies, Silverstone (2007) argues that media participate in constructing moral orders by shaping perceptions of fairness and legitimacy. Couldry and Hepp (2017) similarly emphasize media's role in negotiating normative hierarchies.

In Nigeria, moral traditions have historically linked success to diligence, integrity and communal respectability (Ekeh, 1975; Oso, 2012). Wealth required narrative grounding in visible effort or social contribution. Spectacular digital display, however, may detach prosperity from process.

Bauman (2007) argues that consumer culture privileges immediacy and visibility over long-term vocational identity. Banet-Weiser (2012) similarly contends that branding replaces character as a marker of recognition. In digitally mediated environments, success becomes quantifiable through followers and metrics (Van Dijck, 2013; Marwick, 2013).

The transformation of work ethic, if it occurs, is not mechanically imposed by algorithms. It emerges at the intersection of structural amplification and interpretive negotiation. Audiences interpret spectacular affluence within contexts of economic precarity (World Bank, 2022; NBS, 2023; Nyamnjoh, 2015). Meaning is socially produced within Nigeria's evolving moral economy.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative-dominant mixed-method (embedded) design, integrating interpretive qualitative inquiry with complementary quantitative engagement metrics. The design aligns with the study's multi-level analytical focus on

(1) representational construction, (2) audience interpretation, and (3) observable patterns of content visibility within Nigeria's digital public sphere.

Mixed-method approaches are particularly suited to socio-communicative phenomena that operate simultaneously at structural and interpretive levels (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). While quantitative indicators reveal patterns of engagement and visibility, they do not capture how such representations are interpreted. Conversely, qualitative approaches illuminate meaning-making but may insufficiently account for structural amplification dynamics. A qualitative-dominant embedded design therefore enables methodological triangulation while preserving interpretive depth (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018).

### Epistemological Positioning

The study is grounded in an **interpretivist epistemology**, consistent with symbolic interactionism and moral economy frameworks (Blumer, 1969; Silverstone, 2007). It assumes that social meanings particularly those relating to success, legitimacy and work ethic are constructed through interaction with mediated representations within specific socio-economic contexts (Schwandt, 2000).

### Operationalization of Key Concept

For analytical clarity, work ethic is operationalized in this study as: normative beliefs about the relationship between effort, time, legitimacy and reward, including perceptions of diligence, patience, acceptable pathways to success and the moral valuation of labor.

This definition guided both interview protocols and thematic coding.

### Data Collection

Data were collected between January and June 2025 through three complementary strategies:

- Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of high-engagement wealth-centered posts
- Semi-structured interviews

- Systematic engagement metrics review

This triangulated design enables analysis across representation, interpretation and visibility (Denzin, 1978; Flick, 2018).

### Critical Discourse Analysis of Wealth-Centered Content

A total of 120 social media posts were analyzed across 15 high-visibility Nigerian accounts on Instagram, TikTok and X (formerly Twitter). These platforms were selected due to their centrality to influencer culture and digital visibility in Nigeria.

### Sampling Criteria

Posts were selected based on:

- Content relevance: Explicit visual or narrative emphasis on affluence (e.g., luxury vehicles, designer fashion, private travel, elite environments)
- High engagement performance, operationalized as:
  - Posts within the top 10% of engagement on each account, OR
  - Posts exceeding 50,000 interactions (likes, comments, shares, or views), depending on platform norms

This operationalization ensures that selected content reflects high visibility within platform ecosystems, rather than arbitrary selection.

### Analytical Approach

Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1998) was used to examine how wealth is constructed linguistically and visually. The analysis focused on:

1. Lexical markers of aspiration (e.g., "success," "blessed," "winning")
2. Visual symbolism (luxury objects, elite spaces, status aesthetics)
3. Narrative framing of success (speed, effortlessness, divine favor, "hustle")
4. Presence or absence of labor narratives

This approach enables examination of how meaning is constructed and normalized within high-visibility content.

### Semi-Structured Interviews

A total of 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted across three participant groups:

1. Journalists/media practitioners (n = 8)
2. Media and communication scholars (n = 6)
3. Youth social media users aged 18–35 (n = 10)

### Recruitment Process

Participants were recruited through a combination of:

1. Professional networks (for journalists and scholars)
2. Academic referrals
3. Snowball sampling, where initial participants referred additional eligible individuals

Youth participants were selected based on active social media engagement (minimum daily use of 2 hours) to ensure familiarity with digital content dynamics.

### Demographic Profile

Participants reflected diversity in:

- Gender
- Professional background
- Socio-economic positioning

### Data Collection Procedure

Interviews were conducted between February and May 2025, lasting 45–70 minutes each. All interviews were:

1. Audio-recorded with consent
2. Transcribed verbatim
3. Anonymized

### Saturation

Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached, defined as the point at which no new conceptual categories emerged from additional interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

### Engagement Metrics Review

To contextualize discourse analysis, engagement data were collected for all sampled posts.

Metrics included:

- Likes, comments, shares, and views
- Engagement ratios (interaction relative to follower count)
- Comparative performance between wealth-centered and non-wealth posts within the same accounts

These metrics serve as observable indicators of content visibility, not direct measures of algorithmic processes.

Given the opacity of proprietary platform algorithms, this study does not claim to directly observe algorithmic operations. Instead, it interprets engagement patterns as indicative of likely amplification dynamics within attention-driven systems (Napoli, 2019; Bucher, 2018).

### Sampling Strategy

The study employs purposive and snowball sampling, consistent with qualitative research emphasizing analytical depth (Patton, 2015).

### Purposive Sampling (Content)

Accounts were selected based on:

- High follower count ( $\geq 100,000$  followers) or verified status
- Consistent wealth-centered content
- High engagement performance
- Nigerian identity or audience

### Snowball Sampling (Interviews)

Participants were recruited through referral networks to access:

- Domain expertise (journalists, scholars)
- Active digital users (youth participants)

Sampling prioritized **diversity and theoretical relevance**, not statistical representativeness.

### Data Analysis

Data analysis combined three complementary techniques:

#### Thematic Analysis (Interviews)

Interview data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019).

The process involved:

1. Data familiarization
2. Initial coding
3. Category development
4. Theme construction
5. Iterative refinement

Coding was both:

- Deductive (guided by concepts such as symbolic capital and moral economy)
- Inductive (allowing emergent themes)

#### Rigor Measures

To enhance analytic credibility:

1. Coding was conducted iteratively
2. A reflexive audit trail was maintained
3. Emerging themes were cross-checked for consistency

#### Narrative Framing Analysis (Content)

Using Entman (1993), the analysis identified:

- Definitions of success
- Causal narratives of wealth acquisition
- Moral evaluations
- Implicit behavioral prescriptions

Visual semiotics and temporal framing (e.g., “instant success”) were also examined.

#### Visibility Pattern Analysis (Metrics)

Engagement patterns were analyzed by comparing:

- Wealth-centered posts vs. non-wealth posts
- Interaction density (comments/shares)
- Cross-post visibility trends

Metrics were interpreted cautiously as indicators not determinants of amplification.

#### Integration

A convergent interpretive approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018) integrated:

- Discursive patterns
- Audience interpretations

- Engagement trends

This triangulation strengthens analytical validity.

## 4.5 Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to established ethical standards (Israel & Hay, 2006).

### Interview Ethics

- Informed consent obtained
- Voluntary participation
- Right to withdraw
- Pseudonymization
- Secure data storage

### Digital Data Ethics

- Only publicly accessible posts used
- Accounts anonymized (except public figures)
- No scraping or policy violations

### Reflexivity

The research maintained reflexive awareness (Finlay, 2002) to avoid moral bias and ensure analytical neutrality.

## Findings

### Wealth as Performance: Spectacle, Identity, and High-Visibility Content

Analysis of the sampled dataset (120 posts across 15 accounts) and interview narratives indicates that wealth within Nigeria's digital public sphere is actively constructed as performance rather than passively displayed. This performance is structured through recurring visual, linguistic and narrative patterns that align with high-engagement content formats.

#### Affluence as Staged Spectacle

Across platforms, posts exhibiting high engagement consistently foregrounded visually dominant markers of affluence including luxury vehicles, private jets, designer fashion, upscale leisure environments and elite social gatherings.

For example, one Instagram post (Account A, 1.2M followers) featured a short video of a luxury vehicle delivery, accompanied by the caption: *"From nothing to this in 3 years. Grace speaks louder than effort."*

The post generated over 185,000 likes and 9,200 comments, significantly outperforming adjacent posts on the same account that documented business processes or professional activities.

Similarly, a TikTok post (Account C) showcasing a private jet experience included hashtags such as #softlife #bigmoves #blessed, with minimal narrative explanation of economic pathway. The emphasis remained on arrival rather than trajectory.

Across the dataset, such posts displayed three consistent discursive characteristics:

- Outcome-centered narration (celebration of success moments)
- Minimal process transparency (limited reference to labor or time investment)
- Affective framing (emphasis on elevation, breakthrough, or divine favor)

Interview participants recognized this pattern. A media scholar (Participant S3) noted: *"What we are seeing is not wealth itself, but curated visibility of wealth. The process disappears; the result becomes the story."*

A journalist (Participant J2) similarly observed: *"The more dramatic the visual, the more it travels. It doesn't matter what led to it."*

### Luxury Aesthetics as Identity Construction

Beyond spectacle, wealth performance operates as identity work. Influencer content consistently embedded luxury within broader narratives of:

1. Personal transformation
2. Global mobility
3. Elite belonging

Youth participants frequently interpreted these representations aspirationally. One respondent (Participant Y7) stated: *"When you see that lifestyle constantly, it becomes what success should look like. Not what you do, but what you show."*

Another participant (Y3) described such figures as: *"levels you want to reach, even if you don't know how they got there."*

However, interpretations were not uniform. Several participants expressed skepticism: *"Sometimes it looks unrealistic, but it still influences how people measure themselves."* (Y5)

### Analytical Synthesis

These findings indicate that wealth is performed through spectacle-oriented representation, structured around visibility, affect and aesthetic intensity. Engagement comparisons suggest that such representations are more visible within platform environments, though this is interpreted as alignment with engagement dynamics rather than direct proof of algorithmic causation.

### Engagement Patterns and Likely Amplification Dynamics

The second major finding concerns the differential visibility of wealth-centered content, observed through engagement patterns.

#### Observed Engagement Differentials

Across sampled accounts, wealth-centered posts consistently recorded higher interaction rates than non-wealth content from the same creators.

For instance:

1. A luxury-themed post (Account F) generated 3.4× more comments than a business-related post posted within the same week
2. A travel-luxury video (Account B) received **over** 220% more shares than a professional advisory post

These patterns were consistent across platforms and accounts.

### Interpretation of Amplification

Given the opacity of platform algorithms, the study does not claim direct observation of algorithmic processes. However, the consistency of engagement patterns suggests that: wealth-centered spectacle aligns strongly with engagement signals that are commonly understood to influence content ranking and visibility.

Interview participants also recognized this dynamic. A journalist (J5) remarked: *“The algorithm seems to favor what keeps people reacting and luxury always does that.”*

A youth participant (Y2) similarly stated: *“If it looks expensive, it will trend faster. That’s just how it works now.”*

### Rewarding Spectacle over Process

Content emphasizing:

1. Skill acquisition
2. Career progression
3. Incremental entrepreneurship

Consistently received lower engagement relative to spectacle-driven posts.

This suggests not absence of such content, but relative visibility disadvantage.

### Analytical Synthesis

The data indicate that wealth-centered content is disproportionately visible within engagement-driven environments. Rather than asserting deterministic algorithmic causation, the findings suggest a probable alignment between spectacle and visibility incentives within platform systems.

### Compressed Financial Timelines and the Representation of Success

A third major finding concerns the temporal framing of success, particularly the construction of accelerated financial trajectories.

### Narratives of Rapid Transformation

Across the dataset, posts frequently implied short timelines between obscurity and affluence. For example, a post (Account D) included the caption: *“Started from zero, now living the life most people dream of.”*

No specific timeframe or process was provided. The accompanying visuals focused exclusively on luxury consumption.

Similarly, multiple posts used phrases such as:

1. *“No long talk, just results”*
2. *“Results over excuses”*

These formulations foreground outcome while suppressing duration and process.

### Audience Interpretation of Temporal Compression

Interview participants repeatedly referenced “fast money” narratives.

*“Everything looks like it happened overnight, even when you know it didn’t.”* (Y4)

*“People don’t want slow progress anymore because what they see is fast success.”* (Y9)

### Marginalization of Incremental Labor

Posts documenting gradual progress such as business development steps or professional milestones were:

- Less frequent in high-engagement samples
- Less interaction-heavy when present

Participants interpreted this as shaping expectations: *“It creates pressure. You start questioning why your own progress is slow.”* (Y1)

However, traditional values were not entirely displaced: *“We still believe in hard work, but social media makes it look like that’s not enough.”* (Y6)

### Analytical Synthesis

The findings indicate that digital representations frequently construct compressed timelines of success, contributing to a symbolic environment in which immediacy becomes normalized. This supports the argument that mediated affluence reshapes perceptions of time, effort, and reward.

### Visibility as Validation and the Reframing of Work Ethic

The final finding concerns the normative implications of visibility, particularly how digital prominence functions as a marker of legitimacy.

### Visibility as a Signal of Success

Participants consistently identified visibility metrics as indicators of achievement:

*“If you’re trending, people assume you’ve made it.”* (Y8)

*“Followers now matter as much as what you actually do.”* (Y2)

Verification badges, viral posts and follower counts were interpreted as evidence of success, regardless of underlying economic processes.

### Reframing of Work

Participants described a shift toward what they termed “smart work”, defined as:

1. Strategic content creation
2. Aesthetic optimization
3. Trend responsiveness

*“It’s no longer just about working hard; it’s about knowing how to position yourself.” (Y3)*

However, this did not eliminate traditional values: *“Real work still matters, but online visibility gives faster recognition.” (Y10)*

### **Normative Tension**

Rather than full transformation, the data indicate coexistence of value systems:

- Traditional: effort, patience, legitimacy
- Digital: visibility, virality, recognition

Participants navigated both simultaneously.

### **Analytical Synthesis**

The findings suggest that visibility operates as a parallel system of validation, reshaping how work ethic is interpreted without fully displacing established norms. This reflects a reconfiguration rather than erosion of moral frameworks.

## **Discussion**

### **Digital Spectacle and the Reconfiguration of Value Hierarchies**

The findings demonstrate that the prominence of spectacular wealth in Nigeria’s digital public sphere is not simply a cultural preference but a structurally mediated outcome of engagement-driven visibility systems. Wealth is not only displayed; it is formatted in ways that align with high-engagement content patterns and consequently, attains disproportionate visibility within platform environments.

This extends classical accounts of conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1899/1994) by situating luxury display within algorithmically mediated attention economies. Whereas Veblen conceptualized consumption as a social signal within stratified groups, the present findings indicate that in digital environments, visibility itself becomes the primary medium of distinction. Spectacle is not merely symbolic it is operationally advantaged within engagement-based ranking systems.

Importantly, the study does not claim direct observation of algorithmic processes. Rather, the consistent engagement differentials observed across sampled posts suggest a systematic alignment between spectacle and visibility incentives, consistent with political economy accounts of platform capitalism (Srnicek, 2017; Napoli, 2019).

This structural alignment reshapes the accumulation of symbolic capital. In Bourdieu’s (1984) terms, recognition depends on validation within a field; however, the field itself is now partially organized through quantifiable engagement metrics. As the findings show, follower counts, virality and interaction levels increasingly function as signals of legitimacy, operating alongside but not fully replacing

traditional markers such as professional achievement or communal reputation.

The result is not a displacement of value systems but a reconfiguration of evaluative hierarchy, in which visibility operates as a parallel criterion of success.

### **Temporal Compression and the Reframing of Achievement**

A second key implication concerns the temporal structure of success narratives. The findings show that wealth-centered content frequently foregrounds outcome while minimizing process, producing representations of accelerated or compressed financial trajectories.

This pattern does not imply that audiences fully accept such narratives as literal. Rather, repeated exposure contributes to a symbolic environment in which immediacy becomes a salient feature of aspirational imagination. As participants indicated, even when underlying effort is assumed, the visible emphasis remains on rapid transformation.

This aligns with broader accounts of contemporary mediated culture that privilege immediacy and visibility over duration (Bauman, 2007). However, the Nigerian context marked by youth unemployment and constrained economic mobility intensifies the significance of such representations. When opportunities for gradual advancement are limited, compressed success narratives may carry heightened aspirational weight.

Importantly, the findings indicate normative tension rather than normative collapse. Participants consistently distinguished between “real success” and “social media success,” suggesting that traditional values of diligence and incremental progress remain culturally meaningful. However, these values now coexist with highly visible representations that emphasize speed and culmination.

The implication is a recalibration of aspirational timelines, where expectations are shaped not only by lived economic structures but also by repeated exposure to high-visibility outcomes.

### **Visibility, Legitimacy, and the Transformation of Evaluative Standards**

The most consequential shift identified in the findings concerns the role of visibility as a marker of validation. Across interviews, participants repeatedly associated digital prominence, followers, virality, verification with indicators of success.

This suggests that visibility is not merely representational but evaluative. It functions as a publicly legible signal of worth, shaping how achievement is interpreted within the digital public sphere.

From the perspective of the algorithmic public sphere (Gillespie, 2018; Helberger, 2020), this reflects a shift in how

legitimacy is constructed. Prominence is increasingly structured through engagement performance rather than deliberative or vocational criteria alone.

However, the findings do not support a deterministic interpretation. Traditional frameworks of legitimacy grounded in effort, integrity, and communal respectability remain active within participants' narratives. What emerges instead is a dual system of evaluation:

- Vocational legitimacy (effort, process, competence)
- Visibility-based legitimacy (engagement, prominence, reach)

These systems coexist and are often negotiated in practice. As participants indicated, digital visibility can accelerate recognition, even where underlying processes remain opaque.

Thus, the transformation of work ethic is better understood not as erosion, but as reorientation within a hybrid evaluative framework, where effort is increasingly interpreted through its capacity to generate visibility.

### **Journalism and Mediated Amplification**

The findings also highlight the role of journalism as an intermediary within the same attention economy that structures influencer content.

News organizations, operating under audience analytics and revenue pressures, may inadvertently extend the visibility of spectacular wealth through coverage that prioritizes high-engagement stories. This creates a recursive dynamic in which:

1. Influencer content generates engagement
2. News media amplify visibility
3. Amplification reinforces symbolic prominence

This dynamic aligns with scholarship on analytics-informed gatekeeping (Tandoc & Vos, 2016), where editorial decisions are shaped by audience metrics.

However, journalism retains the institutional capacity to recontextualize spectacle. As participants noted, the difference between amplification and critique lies in framing. Coverage that situates wealth within broader socio-economic conditions rather than presenting it as isolated achievement can reintroduce process, structure, and accountability into public discourse.

The implication is not that journalism should avoid covering wealth, but that it must navigate a structural tension between:

1. Engagement imperatives, and
2. Public interest responsibilities

Maintaining this distinction is critical within an environment where visibility increasingly functions as validation.

### **Implications for Nigeria's Public Sphere**

The broader implications of these findings extend to the symbolic organization of Nigeria's public sphere.

First, the increasing prominence of spectacle suggests a redistribution of attention, where highly visual, affective content competes with more deliberative forms of discourse. This does not eliminate civic engagement but may reshape the relative visibility of different forms of communication.

Second, the recalibration of aspirational benchmarks particularly among youth reflects the interaction between structural economic constraints and mediated representations of success. While digital platforms can enable new forms of entrepreneurship and visibility, they also shape expectations in ways that may not align with material conditions.

Third, the coexistence of traditional and visibility-based evaluative systems introduces normative ambiguity. When effort and reward appear decoupled in visible representations, the moral coherence of economic life may become less stable, even if not fully disrupted.

These implications are best understood as structural ambivalence rather than deterministic outcomes. The same infrastructures that amplify spectacle also enable participation, creativity, and alternative economic pathways.

### **Normative and Policy Implications**

Given that the dynamics identified are structurally embedded, responses must operate at systemic levels.

#### **Media Literacy**

Media literacy should extend beyond misinformation to include algorithmic awareness and interpretive competence. As the findings indicate, audiences already exhibit partial skepticism; strengthening this capacity can enable more reflexive engagement with aspirational content.

#### **Platform Transparency**

While direct access to algorithmic systems is limited, greater transparency around content ranking and amplification criteria would enhance public understanding of how visibility is structured. The goal is not to regulate expression but to clarify how prominence is produced.

#### **Journalistic Practice**

Journalism can play a critical role by contextualizing wealth narratives, foregrounding process and interrogating structural conditions. This does not require rejecting popular content but reframing it within broader socio-economic realities.

#### **Synthesis**

Taken together, the findings suggest that Nigeria's digital public sphere is undergoing a reconfiguration of evaluative standards, shaped by the interaction between platform infrastructures, mediated representations and audience interpretation.

The "algorithm of affluence" is therefore best understood not as a cultural anomaly, but as a socio-technical process in which:

1. Spectacle aligns with visibility incentives

2. Visibility functions as validation
3. Success is increasingly interpreted through both effort and exposure

This transformation does not erase existing moral frameworks. Rather, it introduces a parallel system of recognition, producing a hybrid landscape in which traditional and digital logics of legitimacy coexist and interact.

## Conclusion

This study examined how highly visible performances of wealth in Nigeria's digital media environment are reshaping the symbolic and moral architecture of the contemporary public sphere. Integrating critical discourse analysis, thematic interviews, and engagement pattern observation, the research traced the relationship between platform-mediated visibility, representations of affluence, and evolving interpretations of work ethic and legitimacy.

## Summary of Core Findings

Four interrelated dynamics emerged.

First, wealth operates as performance: affluence is staged through spectacle, aesthetic prominence and celebratory framing, with emphasis placed on visible outcomes rather than underlying processes.

Second, such representations appear disproportionately visible within engagement-driven platform environments. Posts featuring conspicuous affluence consistently recorded higher interaction levels, suggesting alignment with visibility dynamics that favor visually striking and affectively engaging content.

Third, mediated representations frequently compress financial timelines, foregrounding accelerated success while marginalizing incremental labor and vocational development.

Fourth, visibility increasingly functions as a marker of validation. Digital prominence measured through followers, virality, and engagement becomes intertwined with perceptions of legitimacy, subtly reshaping how achievement is evaluated.

Importantly, the findings do not indicate wholesale moral erosion. Rather, they reveal normative tension. Traditional values emphasizing diligence, integrity and communal respectability remain culturally salient, yet they now coexist with visibility-driven standards of success. Nigeria's digital public sphere thus emerges as a site of negotiation between overlapping evaluative frameworks.

## Theoretical Contribution

This study advances scholarship in three principal respects.

First, it extends theories of conspicuous consumption and spectacle into digitally mediated environments, showing how

visibility and engagement function as structuring conditions of contemporary display.

Second, it bridges political economy of communication and moral economy perspectives by demonstrating how platform-based visibility dynamics participate in the reconfiguration of symbolic hierarchies. The concept of algorithmic moral reordering is proposed to describe this process, wherein visibility patterns influence how success, effort, and legitimacy are interpreted.

Third, by situating the analysis within Nigeria, a Global South context marked by economic precarity and youth unemployment, the study contributes to de-Westernizing digital media scholarship. It highlights how global platform logics interact with locally embedded moral frameworks, producing hybrid and context-specific configurations of value.

## Final Reflection

The broader implication is that digital platforms function not only as channels of communication but as environments that shape how success becomes visible and, consequently, how it is socially understood. In Nigeria's evolving public sphere, visibility increasingly operates alongside effort as a marker of achievement.

The challenge, therefore, is not to reject digital visibility or aspirational culture, but to ensure that visibility does not become the sole or dominant criterion of legitimacy. Sustaining a balanced communicative environment where process, competence and ethical practice remain symbolically meaningful alongside visibility will be central to the long-term stability of normative expectations in an algorithmically mediated age.

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