Fraud as Survival: Machiavelli, Economic Despair, and the Philosophical Justification of Yahoo-Yahoo in Southeastern Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

In the bustling streets of Onitsha and the cyber cafés of Enugu, a new kind of hustler has emerged—young, digitally savvy, and morally ambivalent. Adorned in designer wear and fuelled by broken promises, these youth navigate the underworld of internet fraud, known popularly as Yahoo-Yahoo, not merely as criminals but as survivors of a failed state. Their actions, though condemned by law, have taken on a strange legitimacy within a society that increasingly rewards spectacle over substance, and cunning over character. This study poses a difficult but necessary question: Can fraud be understood—not justified—as a philosophical response to social injustice and economic abandonment? Drawing on the political realism of Niccolò Machiavelli, the work applies an analytic method to critically examine the Yahoo-Yahoo phenomenon in Southeastern Nigeria. The findings reveal that Yahoo-Yahoo is not merely an economic crime but a mirror reflecting Nigeria's moral and structural failures. The youth who engage in it are not simply choosing fraud—they are rejecting a system that has long rejected them. The conclusion of this work argues that condemning Yahoo-Yahoo without addressing the societal conditions that birthed it is both philosophically dishonest and politically ineffective. While fraud must not be glorified, it must also not be misunderstood. To rebuild a just society, Nigeria must offer more than prisons—it must offer paths to dignity. The recommendation is not a call for leniency, but for reflection: a reawakening of ethical leadership, a reordering of societal values, and a reconstruction of opportunity grounded in justice, equity, and respect for human potential.

Keywords: *Machiavelli, Yahoo-Yahoo, Internet Fraud, Virtù, Political Philosophy, Digital Hustle, Social Resistance*

INTRODUCTION

In the alleys of Onitsha and the suburbs of Awka, beneath the glass towers of Enugu's rising tech spaces and the dusty roofs of Nnewi's auto markets, a curious contradiction brews: a generation both vilified and glorified for its cunning. To outsiders, "Yahoo-Yahoo" is a criminal enterprise—a digital con rooted in lies and manipulation. But to many within these towns, it is more than a scheme; it is a desperate adaptation to a system that has failed them. In this shifting moral terrain, one cannot help but ask: *What happens when survival demands deception, and the state has abandoned its youth to an economic*

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wasteland? This study is not a justification of crime, nor is it an endorsement of fraud. It is an interrogation—an unflinching philosophical inquiry into how survival, injustice, and despair converge to create a moral grey zone where crime wears the cloak of resistance. Drawing from Niccolò Machiavelli's political thought, especially his pragmatic approach to power, deception, and necessity, this research explores how *yahoo boys* in Southeastern Nigeria have reimagined themselves not as criminals, but as survivors—digital princes in a chaotic republic.

Machiavelli wrote in the crucible of political decay, amid collapsing republics and manipulative monarchs. For him, power was not bound by Christian virtue or Platonic ideals; it was rooted in *necessità*—the brutal urgency of the moment. The *yahoo* phenomenon emerges from a similar decay. Nigeria's postcolonial project, riddled with corruption, nepotism, and economic exclusion, has produced not only unemployment but *existential hopelessness.* When the traditional paths to success—education, hard work, civic responsibility—lead nowhere, alternatives become not just viable but rational. The question, then, is not whether Yahoo-Yahoo is morally right or wrong by conventional standards. Rather, it is: *Can we understand it as a Machiavellian response to a failed social contract?* If the state cannot guarantee the basic conditions for life—security, opportunity, fairness—do the disenfranchised not have the moral latitude to act according to their own necessity?

This research will be guided by an *analytic method*—interpreting Machiavellian thought within the context of postcolonial Nigerian realities, and drawing parallels between his justification of statecraft and the individual strategies employed by *yahoo boys* to navigate structural injustice. Interviews, cultural observations, media portrayals, and philosophical texts will form the backbone of this inquiry. In essence, this work argues that while Yahoo-Yahoo remains legally wrong, its philosophical roots may be traced to a deeper social and economic betrayal. It reflects a grim philosophical realism: when institutions collapse, morality becomes negotiable. Through the lens of Machiavelli, we explore whether *fraud*, in this context, is not merely an act of greed—but a form of protest, a twisted assertion of agency, and ultimately, a philosophy of survival.

The Anatomy of Despair: Youth Unemployment and Structural Failure in Southeastern Nigeria

To understand the rise of Yahoo-Yahoo as a form of survival, one must first dissect the anatomy of despair that has come to define the lives of many young people in Southeastern Nigeria. This despair is not born out of laziness or moral deficiency, as is often suggested in mainstream narratives. Rather, it is the product of layered and enduring structural failures—economic exclusion, governmental negligence, collapsing educational systems, and the withering away of trust in public institutions. Southeastern Nigeria, home to industrious hubs like Aba, Nnewi, and Onitsha, has historically been celebrated for its entrepreneurial spirit. Yet in the last two decades, the same region has witnessed a generation slipping into socioeconomic invisibility. Thousands of graduates churned out annually by institutions like Nnamdi Azikiwe University and the Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University find themselves caught in a vicious cycle—overqualified, underemployed, and systemically forgotten. Many of them carry certificates like burdens, relics of a promise that education would deliver economic emancipation. But the jobs are simply not there. The industries are stunted, the infrastructures are failing, and the political will to address youth unemployment remains painfully absent.

Take the example of Chibueze, a 28-year-old graduate of Computer Science from Enugu State University of Science and Technology. After completing his National Youth Service Corps (NYSC), Chibueze submitted over fifty job applications across various sectors—banking, ICT, education—but never got a single interview. With no capital to start a business, and no support from an already overburdened family, he turned to freelancing online. What started as honest attempts to offer graphic design on platforms like Fiverr eventually spiraled into involvement with fraudulent email schemes. "At least now I can eat," he said, unapologetically, in a conversation recorded in Onitsha in 2024.

Chibueze is not an anomaly. His story mirrors thousands across the region. The informal economy—comprising everything from street trading to digital fraud—has become a buffer zone, absorbing those whom the formal economy has abandoned. Yet, while selling recharge cards or driving a tricycle offers a barely livable income, internet fraud promises fast money, luxury, and a temporary escape from the social shame of joblessness. At the heart of this crisis is the Nigerian state's failure to build systems that work for its youth. Policies targeting youth empowerment are often hollow, riddled with corruption and nepotism. Employment schemes become political tools rather than genuine platforms for inclusion. Vocational centres lack funding, and business grants rarely reach the people they are meant for. Even entrepreneurship, long praised as a solution, cannot thrive without stable electricity, affordable internet, or access to credit—amenities still lacking in many Southeastern towns.[1]

Furthermore, the cultural expectation of success adds to the weight. In Igbo society, success is often publicly measured—by property owned, cars driven, or cash sprayed at weddings. A young man who returns from Lagos or Malaysia empty-handed is seen as a failure, regardless of the integrity of his journey. This societal pressure, combined with systemic exclusion, creates a perfect storm—where despair is not only emotional but existential. In this broken environment, Yahoo-Yahoo appears less as an anomaly and more as a logical, albeit troubling, consequence. It is the result of what Frantz Fanon once called "the violence of the structure"—the quiet, persistent violence of poverty, rejection, and neglect. When survival itself becomes an act of resistance, morality is pushed into new and uncomfortable territories. Thus, the anatomy of despair in Southeastern Nigeria is not just a tale of unemployment. It is a story of failed governance, eroded dreams, and a generation that has had to redefine what it means to survive. Yahoo-Yahoo is not born in isolation—it is incubated in a society that has, for many, closed the doors to legitimate success while glamorising the fruits of ill-gotten wealth. The challenge is no longer just economic. It is moral, philosophical, and deeply political.

Understanding Yahoo-Yahoo: Crime, Culture, and the Craft of Deception

Yahoo-Yahoo, often reduced in public discourse to mere cybercrime, is far more complex than it appears on the surface. It is a cultural, economic, and psychological phenomenon—one that intertwines crime with creativity, technology with survival, and deception with a warped sense of justice. In Southeastern Nigeria, where systemic neglect and youth unemployment are widespread, Yahoo-Yahoo has evolved into a lifestyle and, for some, a grim art form. It is not only about defrauding unsuspecting victims overseas; it is about crafting an alternative identity in a society where legitimacy offers little hope. At its core, Yahoo-Yahoo involves various forms of internet fraud, from romance scams to fake investment pitches and phishing schemes. Yet beneath the surface lies a deeper motivation—*the desire for dignity in a world that offers none.*[2] It is about reclaiming agency, even through unethical means. Many of these young men, often referred to as *"G-boys,"* exhibit impressive technical skills—writing code, designing convincing fake websites, and running entire fraud networks. These are talents that, in a functional society, would be channelled into startups, cybersecurity firms, or software development. But in the absence of such opportunities, those same skills are redirected toward deception.

Culture also plays a crucial role in shaping the identity and operation of Yahoo-Yahoo. In parts of Igbo society, success is not a private affair—it is measured and celebrated publicly. Lavish spending, exotic cars, and flamboyant lifestyles are symbols of having "made it." For young men from impoverished backgrounds, Yahoo-Yahoo becomes a fast lane to this ideal. Its logic is brutally straightforward: *if the system won't reward your effort, outsmart the system.*[3]

Spirituality often intersects with this craft of deception. Ritualistic practices—sometimes real, sometimes exaggerated in popular lore—are said to enhance persuasive powers or protect the scammer from harm. Shrines, charm-using herbalists (known as *dibias*), and spiritual consultations form part of this underground economy. While this spiritual aspect is sometimes sensationalised in the media, it reflects a broader desperation to control fate in a world that feels uncontrollable. In music, films, and even fashion,

the Yahoo-Yahoo lifestyle is increasingly represented—sometimes glamorised—as a form of rebellion or cleverness. Afrobeats lyrics often contain veiled references to online scamming, subtly embedding the crime into the cultural fabric. This blurring of lines between condemnation and admiration reflects a society caught between traditional morality and modern struggle.

Machiavelli's Logic of Power: The End, the Means, and the Making of the Modern Scammer

Niccolò Machiavelli, writing in the turbulence of Renaissance Italy, offered a cold, clear-eyed understanding of power that continues to resonate centuries later. In *The Prince*, he argued that the preservation of power—not morality—should guide the actions of a ruler. For Machiavelli, virtue (*virtù*) was not about being good but about being effective. If deceit, manipulation, or cruelty were necessary to survive or maintain power, then so be it. *The end justifies the means*—a phrase often oversimplified, yet essential to decoding both his philosophy and the modern tactics of digital fraudsters in Southeastern Nigeria.[4]

At first glance, comparing a Renaissance political thinker to contemporary *Yahoo boys* may seem far-fetched. But dig deeper, and the parallels become unsettlingly clear. The modern scammer operates in a world where survival demands strategy, boldness, and the capacity to manipulate appearances—hallmarks of Machiavellian thought. When the system has shut them out—through poverty, unemployment, or corruption—the *Yahoo boy* crafts an alternative reality where he, not the system, dictates the rules. His tools are not armies or decrees, but laptops, fake personas, social engineering, and psychological warfare. He is not a prince in a palace, but a digital tactician navigating a world as treacherous as any Machiavelli ever described.

Consider Machiavelli's assertion that a ruler must learn "how not to be good" when circumstances demand it. This resonates deeply with the mindset of many young fraudsters who see their actions not as evil, but as *necessary*. In a society where government officials loot public funds, where politicians lie with impunity, and where justice is rarely served, the scammer simply mirrors the same logic of power he observes at the top. He cheats because others cheat. He lies because the state lied to him first. He becomes a prince in his own fragmented kingdom—a kingdom of data, deceit, and survival.

Moreover, Machiavelli warned that relying solely on conventional morality in a corrupt society is a losing game. He believed that success often required calculated cruelty and the illusion of virtue. This insight explains, in part, why some scammers still attend church, sponsor community events, or even donate to the poor. These actions are not contradictions but part of a carefully curated image—*like Machiavelli's ideal prince, they must appear morally upright even when acting immorally.* In this way, the modern scammer does not abandon morality altogether; he simply retools it as strategy.[5]

Yet Machiavelli's thought also reveals a tragic dimension. His prince seeks stability, but the *Yahoo boy* often finds none. While the fraudster may succeed temporarily, he lives in constant fear—of arrest, betrayal, or spiritual consequences. He may ascend quickly but fall even faster. Unlike the prince who commands armies, the scammer's power is fragile, performative, and relentlessly policed by both law and conscience. His world is one of constant improvisation, not lasting sovereignty. Still, the enduring relevance of Machiavelli lies in this: he forces us to confront the uncomfortable gap between moral ideals and political or existential realities. The *Yahoo boy* may be morally wrong, but he is also a product of a world that punishes virtue and rewards cunning. In this way, he is not simply a criminal—he is a modern expression of Machiavelli's most disturbing insights. He is what happens when survival becomes a contest of wits, and morality, a luxury few can afford. Thus, Machiavelli does not *excuse* Yahoo-Yahoo, but he helps us *understand* it. The making of the modern scammer is not merely a tale of crime, but a mirror reflecting deeper societal fractures—where power is pursued not with swords, but with screens; not by princes, but by the desperate.

Fraud as Resistance? Rebellion, Revenge, and the Philosophy of the Oppressed

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Can fraud, in certain contexts, be seen not merely as a crime but as a form of resistance? This question lies at the heart of the Yahoo-Yahoo phenomenon in Southeastern Nigeria. For many of its practitioners, internet fraud is not just about personal gain—it is about rebelling against a system that has failed them, a way of hitting back at global inequality, local corruption, and institutional betrayal. In postcolonial societies like Nigeria, where colonial legacies have merged with modern dysfunction, the lines between victim and villain often blur. Many Yahoo boys do not see themselves as criminals but as underdogs reclaiming what was stolen—by history, by the West, by a corrupt elite. The narrative is emotionally charged: *if the system cheated us first, we are simply returning the favour.*[6]

There is, in this framing, an element of revenge—what Paulo Freire might call *the response of the oppressed*. When hope is denied and dignity stripped away, acts that defy the status quo—no matter how morally ambiguous—begin to feel justified. The scammer becomes a trickster figure, outsmarting both Western greed and local injustice. Emails that con American retirees or European businessmen are, for some, not just cons—they are *symbolic reversals of power*. This rebellion is also internal. It challenges the very values the system tried to impose: work hard, follow the rules, wait your turn. When those values yield nothing but poverty and shame, fraud becomes a language of protest. It is the quiet scream of a generation that feels unheard. Of course, this romanticised framing does not erase the harm caused— real people are deceived, real trust is broken. Yet the philosophy behind Yahoo-Yahoo, when understood deeply, speaks to a wounded consciousness. It is not resistance in the heroic sense, but in the desperate, reactive sense—a rebellion born not of ideology, but of frustration.

The Justification of Wrong: When the Hustle Becomes a Philosophy of Survival

In the streets of Aba, the lounges of Awka, and the backrooms of cyber cafés across Enugu and Nnewi, a phrase echoes with unwavering conviction: *"Man must survive."* This simple declaration, often used to excuse morally questionable actions, reveals a deeper truth about the psyche of a generation forced to choose between legality and livelihood. In the world of Yahoo-Yahoo, wrong is not denied—it is redefined. The hustle becomes more than a means to an end; it becomes a *philosophy of survival.* In a society where the rules appear rigged, where politicians enrich themselves openly and public institutions offer nothing but frustration, the idea of morality itself starts to lose meaning. For many young Nigerians, the system's failure to reward honesty and hard work pushes them into an ethical limbo. Here, success becomes the ultimate moral proof, not the process by which it was attained. As one *G-boy* in Onitsha bluntly put it, *"Nobody asks how you made it, as long as you made it."*[7] This outlook mirrors what some philosophers have called *moral relativism born of structural violence.* When laws do not protect the poor but serve the powerful, the legitimacy of those laws comes into question. Why should a youth respect a legal order that did not educate him properly, offer him employment, or protect his family from poverty? The scammer's rationalisation begins here: *If the system is corrupt, then corruption becomes the only way to succeed within it.*[8]

Philosophically, this is a form of existential defiance. The Yahoo boy reclaims agency in a world that rendered him invisible. He does not wait for opportunity; he takes it, even if that means breaking the law. In doing so, he transforms crime into craft, and hustling into a belief system—where being "smart" means outwitting not just individuals, but the whole machinery of injustice that left him behind. But this justification is not without its cost. Beneath the bravado lies anxiety. Many know, deep down, that what they do causes harm. Some seek spiritual absolution, others mask guilt with flamboyance. The conflict between the need to survive and the instinct to do right creates a cognitive dissonance—*a quiet battle between the street and the soul.* Still, the rise of this hustler ethic cannot be viewed in isolation. It is a symptom of a society that has consistently failed to uphold justice, distribute resources fairly, or provide pathways to dignity. In such a context, the justification of wrong is not merely an excuse—it is a survival logic. The hustle becomes the only philosophy that makes sense when all others have collapsed. Thus, the Yahoo-Yahoo phenomenon is not just about internet fraud—it is about a moral crisis born from

institutional collapse. It is the philosophy of those for whom the legitimate path has disappeared. And until the social contract is restored, the line between wrong and necessary will remain dangerously blurred.

From Villains to Role Models: Yahoo-Yahoo and the Crisis of Ethical Roleplay

Once whispered about in shame and secrecy, Yahoo-Yahoo operatives have, in many Nigerian communities, transformed from villains into a strange breed of local celebrities. They drive luxury cars, sponsor village festivals, throw cash at parties, and sit at the front pews of churches. Their Instagram feeds are filled with symbols of success—designer clothes, foreign trips, crisp dollar bills. What was once hidden is now flaunted. In this unsettling shift, we confront a deeper crisis: not merely the rise of cybercrime, but the *collapse of ethical role models* and the emergence of a generation performing success without the burden of moral responsibility. The Yahoo boy's new image is not accidental. It is a carefully crafted roleplay—an ethical theatre where appearances matter more than substance, and social recognition outweighs integrity. In a society obsessed with outcomes, especially visible wealth, many have grown to admire the *hustle* more than the means. This is not just a corruption of values; it is a profound shift in the cultural imagination. The scammer is no longer just a criminal—he is a performer of prosperity, a symbol of what it means to "make it" in a world where the legitimate path seems blocked.

This crisis of ethical roleplay is deeply rooted in the failure of leadership and societal institutions. Traditional role models—teachers, civil servants, community leaders—no longer inspire the youth. They are often seen as broke, tired, or irrelevant. Meanwhile, politicians who steal public funds are celebrated, pastors preach prosperity without accountability, and entertainment culture glamorises fast wealth. In this moral vacuum, the Yahoo boy steps in—not because he is good, but because he is *visible*. He is the one who "escaped." The result is a distorted moral landscape where success is measured by spectacle, not substance. Young people, seeing the reverence accorded to fraudsters, begin to internalise the idea that crime pays—as long as it is performed well. Ethical behaviour is not discarded, but role-played—performed selectively, especially in public spaces like churches or family gatherings. In this theatre of contradictions, one can be a scammer and a philanthropist, a fraudster and a youth ambassador, a sinner and a Sunday school sponsor.

This blending of vice and virtue creates dangerous confusion. It erodes the social compass and teaches impressionable minds that deception can coexist with honour, so long as the benefits are visible. It turns society into a stage where the line between villain and hero is no longer moral, but aesthetic.[9] Yet, the emergence of Yahoo boys as role models is not merely a cultural failure—it is a cry for structure. In the absence of functioning systems that reward honesty, talent, and perseverance, the fraudster's script becomes more appealing. He plays the role society secretly respects: the one who made something out of nothing, even if it was wrong. To reclaim the future, we must first confront this distortion. We must reimagine success not just as material acquisition, but as contribution, integrity, and sustainability. Until then, the performance will continue—and the applause, tragically, may never stop.

Machiavelli Misread or Fulfilled? The Ethics of Power in a Broken Republic

Is the modern *Yahoo boy* a distortion of Machiavelli—or his most accurate student? This question sits uncomfortably at the crossroads of political philosophy and Nigerian reality. Machiavelli has long been accused of teaching cunning, ruthlessness, and deception. Yet, at his core, he was not advocating wickedness for its own sake. He was simply describing the world as it is—not as it should be. And in doing so, he argued that those who wish to survive, govern, or succeed in a corrupt and chaotic society must be willing to get their hands dirty. Not because they are evil—but because reality demands it. In that sense, Machiavelli did not invent amorality; he merely diagnosed it. And in modern Nigeria—where public institutions are weak, trust is fractured, and legitimacy is for sale—his diagnosis has become prophecy. The *Yahoo boy*, in many ways, does not misread Machiavelli. He fulfils him.

Machiavelli's famous claim that it is better for a ruler to be feared than loved—if he cannot be both—was grounded in survival. The *Yahoo boy*, often surrounded by hostility from law enforcement, envy from peers, and the constant risk of betrayal, operates on a similar logic. He projects wealth, confidence, spiritual invincibility—anything to assert dominance in a world where weakness is punished. He cultivates appearances, much like Machiavelli's prince must appear virtuous while doing what is necessary behind the scenes. But here lies the discomfort: *The Prince* was written for rulers, not for ordinary citizens. It was meant as a guide to political power, not a playbook for everyday survival. So when Machiavellian ethics become tools for the marginalised, the oppressed, or the criminalised, it signals not their corruption—but the breakdown of the republic itself. In a well-ordered society, one should not need deceit to live with dignity. But in a broken republic—where merit is ignored, honesty is punished, and power is hoarded—the people will inevitably begin to mimic the rulers. The ethics of the palace leak into the streets.

And so the *Yahoo boy* becomes a mirror, not just of Machiavelli, but of Nigeria's political elite. He lies because the government lies. He cheats because elections are rigged. He plays the system because the system never played fair with him. His fraud, then, is not merely about greed—it is about imitation. He is not defying the logic of power; he is absorbing it.

Still, this is not a celebration of fraud. Machiavelli himself warned that instability, cruelty, and manipulation, if not carefully controlled, could lead to ruin. And so it is with the *Yahoo boy*. His rise is marked by constant risk, shallow rewards, and a life often haunted by fear, guilt, and spiritual unease. The path of power without structure leads not to glory, but to collapse. In the end, Machiavelli's true warning may lie here: *when everyone must act like a prince to survive, the republic has already failed.*[10] Power, divorced from responsibility and unchecked by justice, will devour not only the rulers but the ruled. And what remains is a theatre of survival, where everyone wears a mask, and ethics are a luxury few can afford. So, was Machiavelli misread or fulfilled? In Nigeria's broken republic, the answer may tragically be both.

Conclusion

Yahoo-Yahoo is more than a crime—it is a symptom. A symptom of a society where systems have collapsed, ethics have eroded, and survival has become the highest law. This study has not sought to glorify fraud or excuse its devastating consequences. Rather, it has aimed to understand its roots, logic, and seductive power through the philosophical lens of Niccolò Machiavelli, whose dark realism speaks uncomfortably well to the Nigerian condition. From the decaying public institutions to the celebration of ill-gotten wealth in politics and pop culture, the youth in Southeastern Nigeria have grown up in a republic that rewards cunning over character, performance over principle. In this landscape, Machiavelli's *virtù*— boldness, intelligence, adaptability—finds a disturbing echo in the *street mind* that fuels the Yahoo-Yahoo ethos. When the state offers little and morality offers even less, the fraudster rebrands himself not as a thief, but as a strategist, a survivor, a prince in digital disguise.

The normalization of fraud reflects a deeper philosophical crisis: a loss of faith in justice, fairness, and the social contract. Where the law is bent by the rich and accountability is rare, crime becomes not just an act, but a message—of frustration, rebellion, and desperation. Yahoo-Yahoo, then, is not simply about stealing from others; it is a way of reclaiming stolen futures, however flawed that reclamation may be. If Nigeria is to move beyond this moral deadlock, it must do more than criminalize its youth. It must rebuild trust. It must make honesty rewarding, make leadership exemplary, and offer pathways to dignity that do not require deception. Without these, the streets will continue to raise princes of survival in the ruins of a failed republic.

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