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Youth, Digital Livelihoods and the Future of Work in Africa: A Conceptual Model of Platform Labour, Aspiration and Precarity in a Demographic Transition

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ABSTRACT

Africa is adding young people to its working-age population faster than its formal economies can create jobs, and the digital economy (ride-hailing, delivery, online freelancing, content creation and data work for artificial intelligence) is widely promoted as the answer. Yet research on these activities is fragmented across labour studies, media studies, critical data studies and youth studies, and rarely asks where digital work leads. This conceptual paper addresses that gap. Its objective is to develop a model of youth digital livelihoods as a social phenomenon rather than an employment statistic, to derive propositions on when such livelihoods become pathways rather than holding patterns, and to identify the policy instruments that can shift outcomes. Methodologically, the study is an integrative, theory-building review. The population was peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2023 and 2026; a purposive sample of 48 articles was drawn through thematic search streams and retained only after each was verified against its publisher record and screened for retractions, corrections and expressions of concern. Findings were coded against provisional dimensions, compared across livelihood types and synthesised abductively. The analysis yields an income–identity–trajectory model. Youth digital work scores well on identity, poorly on income security and uncertainly on trajectory, because platform work rarely builds the transferable skills, networks or capital that lead elsewhere. Seven propositions specify the role of skill transferability, platform control, embeddedness, the identity premium, geographic and gendered platform rules, aspiration feedback from the visible success of a few, and policy moderation. Nigeria's youth labour market is the anchoring case, where the current configuration points to holding patterns for most and emigration as a growing exit. The paper recommends portable, mandatory social protection for platform workers, recognised certification of skills gained through digital work, transparency and appeal rights over pay and deactivation, an end to geographic monetisation exclusions, and youth employment policies that link digital work to credit, assets and formal employment.

Keywords: youth; digital livelihoods; gig economy; platform labour; precarity

1. INTRODUCTION

Africa is in the middle of a demographic transition that is placing more young people on its labour markets than the formal economy can absorb. The region is projected to hold the world's largest migration-prone age groups by mid-century (Thomas & Mara, 2024), yet the growth dividend that a younger population was expected to deliver has proved weak at the national level, even where falling fertility improves household welfare (Garenne, 2023). In Nigeria, the continent's most populous country and the anchoring case of this paper, youth unemployment and underemployment are rooted in governance failures, insecurity and poverty, and successive governments have responded mainly with short-term skills and job-creation schemes (Virk et al., 2023). The result is a large, educated and connected generation searching for livelihoods in economies where wage jobs are scarce.

Into this gap has stepped the digital economy. Ride-hailing and delivery apps, online freelancing marketplaces, social-media content creation and the data-annotation work on which artificial intelligence (AI) depends are now widely presented, by governments, donors and platforms alike, as an answer to youth unemployment. The promise rests on low entry barriers: a smartphone, a data plan and an account can stand in for credentials and connections that formal employment demands. The platform boom in African cities has itself been made possible by two decades of state and donor investment in connectivity (Cirolia et al., 2023), and mobile subscriptions continue to spread across sub-Saharan Africa even as fixed broadband stagnates (Astuti & Ayinde, 2025).

The scholarship that has grown around this phenomenon is rich but fragmented. Labour studies document algorithmic control, low and volatile earnings and weak voice among African platform workers (Adekoya et al., 2025; Ajonbadi et al., 2025; Anwar, 2025). Media and communication studies document the creative strategies and precarities of African content creators (Alakitan, 2026; Mohammed et al., 2026). Critical data studies document the outsourced labour behind AI (Muldoon et al., 2024; Le Ludec et al., 2023). Youth studies document waithood, hustling and the aspiration to emigrate (Levy & Dubinsky, 2024; Olofinyehun & Wellington, 2026). Each field captures part of what a digital livelihood is. None, on its own, explains why young Africans enter digital work in such numbers despite its documented insecurity, or under what conditions that work leads somewhere better.

This paper addresses that gap by treating the digital livelihood as a social phenomenon rather than an employment statistic. Counting how many young people "work on platforms" says little about what that work pays over time, what it means to those who do it, or where it leads. The paper develops a conceptual model built on three dimensions of a digital livelihood: *income* (its level, volatility and security), *identity* (what the work means to the young person and their community) and *trajectory* (whether it builds the skills, networks and capital that lead elsewhere). Its central argument is that youth digital work in Africa typically scores well on identity, poorly on income security and uncertainly on trajectory, and that this profile explains both its attraction and its risk: it can become a *pathway* to accumulation and mobility, or a *holding pattern* in which effort is expended without accumulation.

Three objectives guide the paper: (i) to synthesise recent peer-reviewed evidence on youth platform labour, content creation and AI data work in Africa into a single analytical framework; (ii) to derive testable propositions about the conditions under which digital livelihoods become pathways rather than holding patterns, including the social consequences of aspirations shaped by the visible success of a few; and (iii) to identify the policy instruments (social protection, skills recognition and platform regulation) through which outcomes can be shifted. Correspondingly, it asks: What constitutes a digital livelihood for young Africans? What explains the gap between the attraction and the security of such work? Under what conditions does it lead somewhere?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

2.1.1 Digital livelihoods and platform labour

A *digital livelihood* is defined here as a set of income-generating activities whose access to work, customers or payment is mediated by a digital platform. The definition is deliberately broad. It

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covers location-based work such as ride-hailing, motorcycle-taxi and delivery services; web-based work such as online freelancing and microtasks; content creation monetised through brand deals and platform programmes; and AI data work such as annotation and content moderation. Recent work cautions against treating these as one category. Muldoon et al. (2024) show that umbrella labels such as "ghost work" or "microwork" obscure institutional differences, and propose a typology of AI data work organised by the institutions that structure it. Dinika (2025), drawing on interviews across Rwanda, Zimbabwe and South Africa, distinguishes high-skilled independents, low-skilled dependents, aspiring and established entrepreneurials and discouraged peripherals, groups that differ in autonomy, income volatility and dependence on ratings. A livelihood framing is useful precisely because it lets these heterogeneous arrangements be compared on common dimensions.

2.1.2 Precarity

Precarity refers to the insecurity of income, employment and protection that results when risks are shifted from employers and states onto workers. In platform settings it is produced by classification as independent contractors, by algorithmic management and by the absence of social protection. Du Toit and Ngubeni (2024), applying Standing's labour-securities framework to migrant food-delivery couriers in Johannesburg, show that flexibility and multiple income streams coexist with exposure to crime, rising costs, harassment and the absence of employment protection. Precarity is therefore not simply low pay; it is the combination of volatility, unprotected risk and the absence of a ladder.

2.1.3 Aspiration, waithood and hustle

Aspiration refers to the socially formed futures that young people imagine and work towards. African youth studies have developed two related concepts. *Waithood* names a prolonged suspension between youth and social adulthood when the markers of adulthood (stable work, marriage, independent housing) are out of reach. Levy and Dubinsky (2024) show that institutions themselves can produce waithood when the futures they promise are not delivered, and Chipangura et al. (2026) find that graduates in Zimbabwe's informal economy variously treat their work as permanent, as waiting, or as a complement to formal employment. *Hustle* names the improvised, entrepreneurial and often precarious pursuit of opportunity. Taru and McNeill (2024) describe "spiritual hustling" among young Pentecostals in Harare who perform success on social media, and Serres (2023) shows how, in Lagos, online success has become a "horizon of survival" for children and young people.

2.1.4 The demographic transition

The *demographic transition* frames the macro-context. The expected "dividend" from a rising share of working-age people depends on whether those people find productive work. Garenne (2023) finds weak national-level associations between dependency ratios and growth in sub-Saharan Africa, but strong household-level benefits of lower fertility. Yingi (2025) argues that a youth bulge combined with scarce formal jobs can be destabilising unless youth empowerment is genuine. In this paper the demographic transition is treated as an entry condition: it supplies the numbers of young people who turn to digital work.

2.2 THEORETICAL REVIEW

Five theoretical lenses from the recent literature inform the model.

Labour process theory and algorithmic management. Labour process theory examines how control over work is exercised and contested. Applied to Nigerian Uber and Bolt drivers, it shows that algorithmic management structures both the transactional relationship between platform and driver and the relational ties between driver and passenger, and that drivers remain despite severe precarity because of perceived flexibility, autonomy and income (Adekoya et al., 2025). This lens explains why the *income* dimension is shaped by platform design rather than by effort alone.

Labour market segmentation. Ajonbadi et al. (2026) propose the concept of "algorithmic segmentation" to explain how platform mechanisms, worker dependence, infrastructure and reputation sort Nigerian web-based workers into segments with unequal access to work, income stability and bargaining power. Segmentation theory explains why the same platform can be a pathway for some and a holding pattern for others.

Differential embeddedness. Schor et al. (2024) argue that how platform workers perceive and accept

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the risks shifted onto them depends on their position in the wider economy. Workers who rely on platform income experience the same arrangements differently from those for whom it is supplementary. This lens explains variation in *trajectory* by reference to resources outside the platform.

Waithood and strain. The waithood concept, combined in recent work with Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital (Chipangura et al., 2026), treats young people as agents responding to blocked transitions. Merton's strain theory, used by Lazarus and Soares (2024) to explain the emergence of cybercrime "hustle kingdoms" in West Africa, adds a darker possibility: where legitimate routes to culturally valued success are blocked, some young people pursue that success by illegitimate means. Together these lenses explain the *identity* dimension and the social consequences of aspiration.

Welfare-regime and policy-feedback perspectives. A growing literature links platform work to the performance of welfare states. Bonoli et al. (2025) associate economic insecurity and weak family policy with more platform work, while Chueri and Busemeyer (2025) find that platform workers support income-support and social-investment policies more strongly than other workers. Nguyen et al. (2024) warn that in the Global South, social policy is increasingly framed as market participation rather than collective risk-pooling. This lens informs the moderating conditions in the model.

2.3 EMPIRICAL REVIEW

2.3.1 Location-based platform work

Research on African ride-hailing and delivery work converges on a picture of autonomy constrained by algorithms. In Nigeria, drivers experience severe precarity but value flexibility (Adekoya et al., 2025), and platform design shapes how workers understand decent work and the voice mechanisms available to them (Ajonbadi et al., 2025). Across several African cities, drivers build self-organised solidarity networks through messaging groups; these networks generate resilience and "reworking" more often than sustained resistance (Anwar, 2025). Studies of motorcycle-taxi platforms in Nairobi and Kigali show that platforms combine foreign and domestic capital and adapt to informal economies (Cirolia et al., 2023), while Mallett (2026), studying Uganda, argues that joining apps does not meaningfully formalise riders: platforms disclaim responsibility for welfare and safety, producing only an "aesthetics of formality." A five-country survey finds that platform features differ little by gender, but wider inequalities leave women working fewer hours, earning less and facing gender-discriminatory cancellations and abuse (Al Mehdar et al., 2025).

2.3.2 Web-based work and online freelancing

Evidence on online freelancing from Africa is thinner. Ajonbadi et al. (2026) find that Nigerian web-based workers experience platforms as simultaneously entrenching precarity and offering opportunity and meaningful work. Ayentimi et al. (2025) conclude that gig work in sub-Saharan Africa has only conditional potential to advance decent-work goals, noting that high-skill online work in the region remains limited. Experimental evidence from Mozambique finds insignificant average employment effects of a digital jobs platform for vocational graduates, with moderate gains for men and none for women (Jones & Sen, 2025). Comparative studies outside Africa add insight into skills: freelancers' digital skills create opportunity by optimising platform tools, circumventing failures and building paths beyond the platform (Fiers, 2024), and platform hiring can reward skills that workers' home institutions do not support (van Slageren & Herrmann, 2024).

2.3.3 Content creation and the creator economy

Social-media content creation is the digital livelihood with the strongest pull on youth identity. Nigerian TikTok creators, excluded from the platform's direct monetisation programme, assemble income from brand deals, sponsorships, referrals and cross-platform promotion, while confronting unreliable payments, algorithmic dependence and harassment (Mohammed et al., 2026). Alakitan (2026) identifies "nested precarities of visibility" among Nigerian influencers, including opaque suspensions, lower revenue shares for creators in lower-income countries, gendered marketing practices that push unpaid work onto micro-influencers, and state actions such as the 2021 Twitter ban; elsewhere, Alakitan (2025) shows that followings are often built by repurposing platform features before affective work begins, and that influencers derive "psychic income" from the role. South African student influencers similarly adapt global monetisation

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strategies to local payment realities and regional exclusions (Adefemi & Mutanga, 2025).

2.3.4 AI data work

AI data work places African youth inside global AI supply chains. Fieldwork in Kenya and Uganda documents low wages, insecurity, strict discipline and gendered harassment in "impact sourcing" firms, and argues that market competition limits the social impact such firms can deliver (Muldoon et al., 2025). Outsourced annotation between France and Madagascar shows that AI often relocates rather than eliminates human labour (Le Ludec et al., 2023). Importantly for the trajectory dimension, data workers in Madagascar deliberately build skills tied to aspirations for entrepreneurship or migration, but because those skills are unrecognised, annotation continues to be treated as unskilled (Cornet et al., 2026).

2.3.5 Youth aspiration, emigration and the Nigerian context

In Nigeria, aspirations are increasingly oriented abroad. In Edo State, people who believe their families want them to migrate express stronger migration aspirations and perceive lower risk (Tuki, 2025). Among educated Nigerians aged 15–35, perceptions of a destination's development strongly predict destination choice, although lower ratings of Nigeria's own development are only weakly associated with intentions to leave (Olofinyehun & Wellington, 2026). Within the country, ICT adoption is associated with higher youth employment in agriculture (Osabohien, 2024), but digital inclusion remains shaped by gender, age, education and socioeconomic status across the continent (Bokhari & Awuni, 2024).

2.4 GAP IN THE LITERATURE

Three gaps follow from this review. First, the literatures on platform labour, content creation and AI data work are rarely brought together, so there is no shared framework for comparing digital livelihoods in Africa. Second, most studies describe conditions at a point in time; few theorise *trajectory*, that is, where digital work leads. The question of whether platform work is a stepping stone or a trap has been posed for migrants in Canada (Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024) but not systematically for African youth. Third, the link between the visible success of a few and the aspirations of the many, which youth studies document (Serres, 2023), has not been connected to the labour-market analysis of platform work. This paper addresses all three.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1 RESEARCH DESIGN

The study is a conceptual, theory-building paper based on an integrative review of peer-reviewed literature. It does not collect primary data. An integrative design was chosen because the phenomenon spans disciplines (labour studies, media and communication, critical data studies, youth studies and social policy) whose findings must be synthesised rather than aggregated statistically. The analytical logic is abductive: concepts and mechanisms reported across studies were compared, recurring patterns were identified, and a model was constructed that accounts for them and generates testable propositions.

3.2 POPULATION AND SAMPLE

The population comprised peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2023 and 2026 on platform labour, digital livelihoods, content creation, AI data work, youth aspiration, waithood, migration, the demographic transition and the social protection or regulation of platform work, with priority given to studies of Africa and Nigeria. Studies from other regions were admitted where they offered theoretical or comparative leverage on mechanisms (for example, on skills, social protection or labour unrest). The sampling technique was purposive, guided by the three dimensions of the emerging model. The final sample comprised 48 articles (Table 1).

3.3 INCLUSION AND EXCLUSION CRITERIA

Studies were included if they (a) were peer-reviewed journal articles; (b) were published, in an issue or as advance online publications, between 2023 and 2026; (c) addressed one or more of the themes above; and (d) could be verified against the publisher's own record. Studies were excluded if they were book chapters, conference proceedings, preprints, working papers, policy reports, theses or news items; if they were published before 2023; if they appeared in outlets with questionable peer-review practices; or if their bibliographic details could not be confirmed against the publisher record. Foundational theoretical

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works published before 2023 are therefore discussed only as they are applied in the sampled literature.

3.4 DATA COLLECTION

Searches were conducted in October 2026 using scholarly web search and the platforms of major academic publishers (including Sage, Oxford University Press, Cambridge University Press, Springer Nature, Emerald, MDPI and Cogitatio). Search strings combined population terms (*youth*, *young people*, *Africa*, *Nigeria*, *Kenya*, *South Africa*, *Ghana*) with phenomenon terms (*gig work*, *platform labour*, *ride-hailing*, *delivery*, *online freelancing*, *content creator*, *influencer*, *data annotation*, *AI data work*, *waithood*, *hustle*, *japa*, *demographic dividend*, *social protection*, *platform regulation*). Searches were organised in four thematic streams corresponding to the components of the model.

3.5 VERIFICATION AND BASES OF JUDGEMENT

Each candidate article was checked against its publisher page (or its DOI landing page) for title, authors, year, journal, volume, issue, pagination or article number, and DOI, and the page was inspected for retraction notices, corrections or expressions of concern. None of the included articles carried such a notice. Of 69 candidate records that reached full-record verification, 48 met all criteria and 21 were excluded: the publisher record could not be accessed for confirmation (n = 15), confirmation rested only on secondary indexes (n = 2), the article type and peer-review status were unclear (n = 1), the item was an editorial or commentary rather than a research article (n = 2), or the study fell outside the scope of the review (n = 1). One article published as a policy brief in a peer-reviewed journal (Virk et al., 2023) was retained because of its Nigeria-specific evidence. Earlier screening removed items outside the date range or not published in journals; these pre-screening exclusions were not counted systematically, which is acknowledged as a limitation. The judgement of relevance rested on whether a study reported evidence on at least one of the three livelihood dimensions or on a condition that moderates them.

Table. 1. Summary of source screening and verification

Stage / outcome	Records (n)
Candidate records reaching full-record verification	69
Excluded: publisher record not accessible for confirmation	15
Excluded: confirmed only through secondary indexes	2
Excluded: article type / peer-review status unclear	1
Excluded: editorial or commentary, not research article	2
Excluded: outside scope of review	1
Included in final sample	48

Note. All 48 included articles were confirmed against publisher records; none carried a retraction, correction or expression of concern at the time of checking (October 2026).

3.6 DATA ANALYSIS

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, findings from each article were extracted and coded against the three provisional dimensions (income, identity, trajectory) and against reported conditions of entry, platform governance and policy. Second, codes were compared across livelihood types (location-based work, web-based work, content creation and AI data work) to identify convergent and divergent patterns, summarised in an evidence map (Table 3). Third, recurrent mechanisms were formalised as propositions and integrated into a model (Figure 1). Throughout, claims were tested against disconfirming evidence, for example findings that platform work offers meaningful opportunity (Ajonbadi et al., 2026) or that skills programmes improve employment (Beber et al., 2025).

3.7 VARIABLE MEASUREMENT

Although the paper is conceptual, its constructs are specified so that they can be measured in future empirical work. Table 2 presents proposed operational definitions and indicators for each construct.

Table. 2. Constructs, operational definitions and proposed indicators

Construct	Operational definition	Proposed indicators
Income	Level, volatility and security of earnings from digital work	Net hourly/monthly earnings after costs; coefficient of variation of earnings; share of income covered by social protection; exposure to deactivation

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Construct	Operational definition	Proposed indicators
Identity	Meaning, status and recognition the work confers on the young person	Self-rated meaningfulness and autonomy; perceived community status; follower or rating-based recognition; intention to remain
Trajectory	Extent to which the work builds skills, networks and capital that lead elsewhere	Certified or portable skills acquired; portable reputation/work history; savings and asset ownership; transitions to enterprise or secure employment over time
Pathway / holding pattern	Outcome after a defined period (e.g., 24 months)	Upward transition (pathway) vs. persistence or churn without accumulation, exit to informality or emigration (holding pattern)
Moderating conditions	Policy and institutional context of the work	Social protection coverage; skills recognition schemes; regulation of pay, allocation and deactivation; collective voice; access to credit

3.8 RELIABILITY, VALIDITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Because the study is interpretive, reliability and validity are addressed through trustworthiness criteria. *Credibility* was supported by verifying every source against its publisher record and by citing only what the sources report. *Dependability* was supported by documenting the search streams, criteria and screening outcomes (Section 3.5, Table 1). *Confirmability* was supported by deliberately seeking contrary evidence. *Transferability* is bounded: the model is anchored in Nigerian and wider sub-Saharan African evidence and should be tested before being applied elsewhere.

3.9 AI USAGE DISCLOSURE AND OTHER DISCLOSURES

Generative AI tools (a large language model) were used to assist with literature searching, screening, checking bibliographic details against publisher records, and preparing an initial draft of the text and figure. All sources were checked against publisher records, and the author(s) reviewed, revised and take full responsibility for the content, interpretations and any errors. No AI tool is listed as an author. The study used only published literature; no human participants were involved, and ethical approval was not required. All sources are listed in the references and are available from their publishers; no additional datasets or code were generated.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 RESULTS

4.1.1 Evidence map across livelihood types

Table 3 summarises how each type of digital livelihood performs on the three dimensions, as reported in the sampled literature. The assessments are qualitative syntheses of the cited studies, not measured scores.

Table. 3. Evidence map: livelihood types on the three dimensions

Livelihood type	Income	Identity	Trajectory
Location-based (ride-hailing, motorcycle taxi, delivery)	Low/volatile; costs and risk transferred to workers (Adekoya et al., 2025; du Toit & Ngubeni, 2024)	High value placed on flexibility and autonomy (Adekoya et al., 2025)	Weak; little formalisation (Mallett, 2026); solidarity aids resilience more than mobility (Anwar, 2025)
Web-based / online freelancing	Unstable; shaped by reputation and segmentation (Ajonbadi et al., 2026)	Moderate–high; meaningful work for some (Ajonbadi et al., 2026)	Mixed; depends on skills that transfer beyond the platform (Fiers, 2024; Jones & Sen, 2025)
Content creation	Irregular; monetisation exclusion and lower revenue shares (Mohammed et al., 2026; Alakitan, 2026)	Very high; visibility and "psychic income" (Alakitan, 2025; Serres, 2023)	Uncertain; highly unequal, platform- and state-dependent (Alakitan, 2026)
AI data work	Low; cost-driven outsourcing (Muldoon et al., 2025; Le Ludec et al., 2023)	Low–moderate; workers reframe identity (Cornet et al., 2026)	Weak; skills built but not recognised (Cornet et al., 2026)

Note. Qualitative synthesis of the cited studies; not measured scores.

Three patterns stand out. First, income is low or volatile and unprotected across all four types, though for different reasons: commission and fee-setting in location-based work, competition and reputation in web-based work, monetisation exclusion and

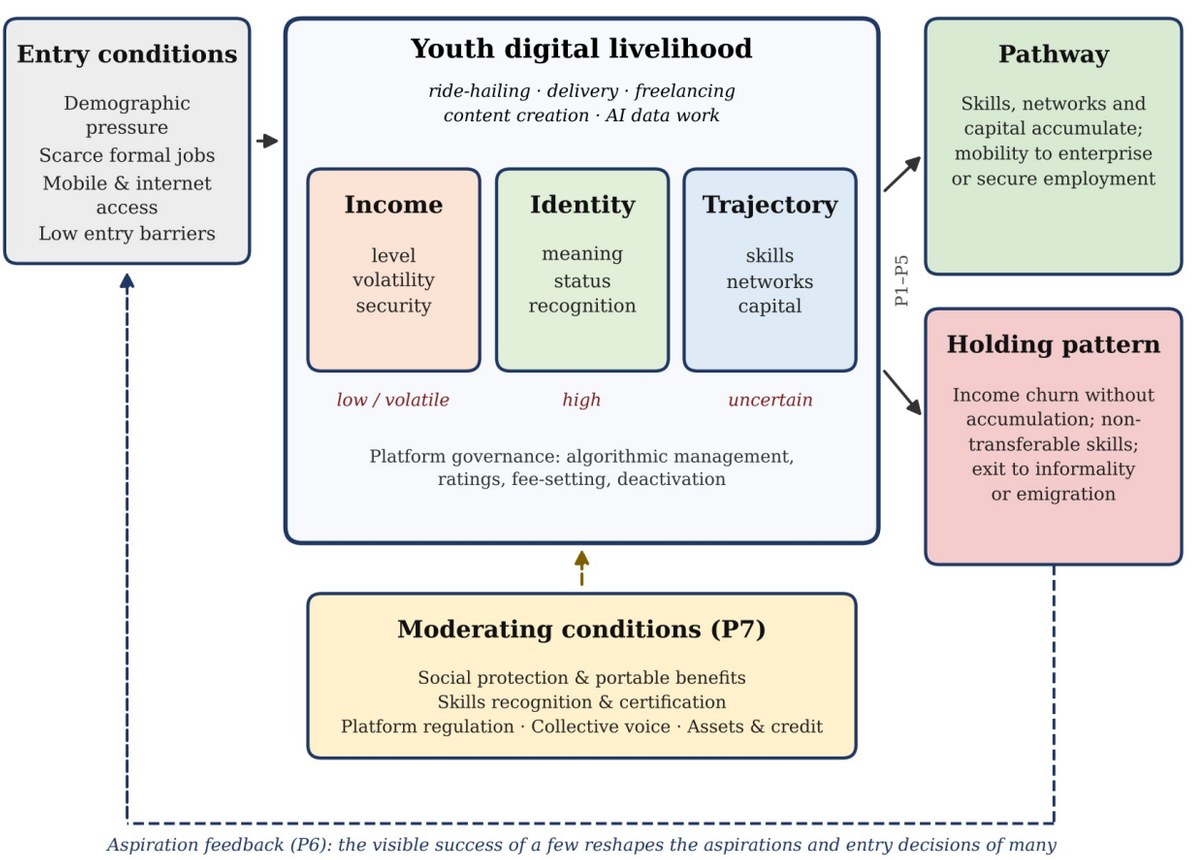
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irregular payment in content creation, and cost-driven outsourcing in AI data work. Second, identity scores are high, especially in content creation, where visibility itself is valued ("psychic income"), and in location-based work, where flexibility and autonomy are prized even when they are partly illusory. Third, trajectory is the most variable dimension. It depends less on the type of work than on whether skills and reputations are transferable and recognised, and on the resources a worker brings from outside the platform.

4.1.2 The income–identity–trajectory model

Figure 1 presents the conceptual model. Entry conditions (demographic pressure, scarce formal jobs, mobile and internet access and low onboarding barriers) channel young people into digital livelihoods. Each livelihood can be characterised on the three dimensions, all of which are shaped by platform governance, meaning algorithmic management, rating systems, fee-setting and deactivation. Depending on the configuration of these dimensions and on moderating conditions, digital livelihoods resolve into one of two outcomes. A *pathway* is a livelihood through which skills, networks and capital accumulate and allow movement into entrepreneurship or more secure employment. A *holding pattern* is one in which income churns without accumulation, skills remain non-transferable, and exit, when it comes, is to informality or emigration. An aspiration feedback loop links outcomes to future entry: the visible success of a few shapes the aspirations and entry decisions of many.

Figure. 1. The income–identity–trajectory model of youth digital livelihoods



Note. P1–P7 refer to the propositions in Section 4.1.3. Source: developed by the author(s) from the reviewed literature.

4.1.3 Propositions

Seven propositions follow from the synthesis.

Proposition 1 (transferability). A digital livelihood is more likely to become a pathway when the skills and reputation it builds are portable and recognised beyond the platform. Freelancers who build paths beyond the platform convert digital skill into resilience (Fiers, 2024), whereas annotation skills

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that go unrecognised leave data workers classified as unskilled (Cornet et al., 2026), and reputations locked into one platform segment workers (Ajonbadi et al., 2026).

Proposition 2 (governance and asset dependence). The greater the platform's unilateral control over pricing, allocation and deactivation, and the greater the worker's dependence on assets they do not own, the more likely a livelihood is to be a holding pattern. Algorithmic control and transferred risk constrain accumulation (Adekoya et al., 2025; du Toit & Ngubeni, 2024), and platforms that disclaim responsibility for welfare leave formalisation largely cosmetic (Mallett, 2026).

Proposition 3 (embeddedness). The same platform work is more likely to be a pathway for young people with education, family resources or other income, and a holding pattern for those wholly dependent on it. This follows from differential embeddedness (Schor et al., 2024), from the range of pathways from "in control" to "trapped" observed among platform workers (Lam & Triandafyllidou, 2024), and from the worker types identified in African platform work (Dinika, 2025; Chipangura et al., 2026).

Proposition 4 (identity premium). The identity value of digital work sustains participation even when income is insecure, which delays exit from holding patterns. Drivers who stay because of autonomy despite severe precarity (Adekoya et al., 2025), and influencers who derive psychic income from visibility (Alakitan, 2025), illustrate the premium. Identity is therefore not merely compensation; it is a mechanism that can lock young people into unrewarding work.

Proposition 5 (geographic and gendered stratification). Platform rules that treat workers differently by country or gender reduce the trajectory value of digital work for those groups. Nigerian creators' exclusion from direct monetisation and the lower revenue shares paid in lower-income countries (Mohammed et al., 2026; Alakitan, 2026) and women's concentration in lower-earning segments (Al Mehdar et al., 2025; Jones & Sen, 2025) are examples.

Proposition 6 (aspiration feedback). Where the visible success of a few digital earners becomes a widely shared horizon of aspiration, entry into digital work increases faster than the opportunities it offers, depressing earnings and lengthening holding patterns. When those aspirations are unmet, some young people redirect them towards emigration and, in some cases, towards illegitimate hustles. This proposition integrates the Lagos evidence on online success as a horizon of survival (Serres, 2023), performed success in Harare (Taru & McNeill, 2024), strain-driven cybercrime (Lazarus & Soares, 2024) and family-supported migration aspirations (Tuki, 2025; Olofinyehun & Wellington, 2026).

Proposition 7 (policy moderation). Social protection that covers irregular and multi-platform work, recognition of skills, collective voice and platform regulation each increase the likelihood that digital livelihoods become pathways. Protection that relies on voluntary, self-paid contributions extends coverage less than mandatory schemes (Zhang & Liu, 2025); irregular hours undermine coverage even where formal entitlement exists (De Becker et al., 2024); existing schemes in South Asia fall short of gig workers' insecurity (Pankaj & Jha, 2026); and organised worker action and public rating of platforms can shift platform policy (Umney et al., 2024; Ray & John, 2025; Graham et al., 2026).

4.1.4 The Nigerian anchoring case

Nigeria shows every element of the model clearly. Entry pressure is high and policy responses have been short-term (Virk et al., 2023). Nigerian ride-hailing drivers combine valued autonomy with severe precarity and limited voice (Adekoya et al., 2025; Ajonbadi et al., 2025). Nigerian web-based workers are sorted by algorithmic segmentation (Ajonbadi et al., 2026). Nigerian creators face geographic exclusion from monetisation and state actions that can abruptly close platforms (Mohammed et al., 2026; Alakitan, 2026). And Nigerian youth aspirations are increasingly oriented towards emigration (Olofinyehun & Wellington, 2026; Tuki, 2025). In model terms, Nigeria's digital livelihoods combine strong identity value with weak income security, and trajectories that depend heavily on external resources. Without moderating conditions, holding patterns are the likely outcome for most young people.

4.2 DISCUSSION

The model reframes the debate about youth digital work in Africa. Optimistic accounts treat digital work as a solution to unemployment; critical accounts treat

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it as exploitation. The income–identity–trajectory model suggests that both are partial. Consistent with Cirolia et al. (2023), who argue that exploitation-only critiques are valid but incomplete, and with Ajonbadi et al. (2026), who find platforms both entrench precarity and offer meaningful work, the model locates the decisive question in trajectory rather than in income or identity alone.

The findings extend labour process accounts (Adekoya et al., 2025) by showing that control operates not only through the algorithm but also through identity. When autonomy and visibility are valued, young people accept insecurity they might otherwise reject. This is consistent with differential embeddedness theory (Schor et al., 2024): the meaning of the work depends on what else the worker has. It also qualifies the resilience finding of Anwar (2025). Solidarity networks help workers cope, but coping is not accumulation.

The aspiration-feedback proposition connects youth studies to labour economics. Waithood scholarship shows that institutions can produce waiting by promising futures they cannot deliver (Levy & Dubinsky, 2024). Platforms can act in a similar way. By making a few success stories highly visible, they invite many entrants into markets that cannot reward them all. Where legitimate aspiration is blocked, strain theory predicts deviant adaptation (Lazarus & Soares, 2024), and migration research shows that aspiration readily turns abroad (Thomas & Mara, 2024; Olofinyehun & Wellington, 2026). For a demographic transition to yield a dividend (Garenne, 2023), digital work must convert aspiration into accumulation rather than displace it.

On policy, the evidence cautions against approaches that frame social protection as market participation (Nguyen et al., 2024). Studies of platform regulation show that firms adapt strategically to regulatory pressure through activism, litigation, subcontracting and threats of withdrawal (Muldoon & Sun, 2024), so regulation must be designed with such responses in mind. Skills policy offers grounds for cautious optimism: recent randomised evaluations in sub-Saharan Africa find more positive employment effects of skills training than earlier reviews (Beber et al., 2025). The model suggests these gains will be larger when training produces recognised, portable credentials.

The paper has limitations. It is conceptual, and its propositions await empirical testing. The sample was restricted to verified 2023–2026 journal articles, which excludes foundational works and grey literature, and access constraints on some publisher platforms meant that some relevant articles could not be verified and were excluded. Evidence on African online freelancing and on content moderation work remains thin. Future research should test the propositions with longitudinal designs that follow young digital workers over time, using the indicators in Table 2. Comparative studies of platforms with different governance rules, and evaluations of social protection schemes for platform workers in Nigeria, would be particularly valuable.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This paper has argued that youth digital livelihoods in Africa are best understood along three dimensions: income, identity and trajectory. The typical profile is strong identity, weak income security and uncertain trajectory, and this profile explains why young people enter digital work in large numbers and why many remain without advancing. Whether digital work becomes a pathway or a holding pattern depends on the transferability of skills and reputation, the intensity of platform control, workers' embeddedness in wider resources, geographic and gendered platform rules, the dynamics of aspiration and the presence of protective policy. In Nigeria, the current configuration points to holding patterns for most, with emigration as an increasingly common exit.

Five recommendations follow. **First**, governments should extend social protection to platform and multi-platform workers through mandatory, contribution-based schemes with portable benefits, rather than relying on voluntary self-insurance. **Second**, skills agencies and platforms should create recognised, portable certification of competencies acquired through digital work, including AI data work and content creation, so that skills count beyond the platform. **Third**, regulators should require transparency in pay, allocation and deactivation, a right of appeal against deactivation, and the portability of ratings and work histories. **Fourth**, platforms should end geographic exclusions from monetisation programmes and revenue-share discrimination against creators in lower-income

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countries, and governments should press for this in trade and digital-policy negotiations. **Fifth**, youth employment policy should treat digital work as one part of a pathway (linked to credit, asset ownership, entrepreneurship support and formal employment) rather than as an endpoint, and public communication should counter unrealistic aspiration with accurate information about digital earnings.

6. CONTRIBUTION TO EXISTING KNOWLEDGE

The paper makes four contributions. **Conceptually**, it defines the digital livelihood as a multidimensional social phenomenon and offers the income–identity–trajectory model as a common framework for comparing ride-hailing, delivery, online freelancing, content creation and AI data work. **Theoretically**, it integrates labour process, segmentation, embeddedness, waithood and strain perspectives, and introduces the pathway versus holding-pattern distinction and the aspiration-feedback mechanism linking the visible success of a few to the labour-market behaviour of many. **Empirically**, it consolidates recent verified evidence from Nigeria and other African countries into an evidence map and a set of operational indicators for future measurement. **For policy**, it identifies specific instruments, namely portable social protection, skills recognition, platform transparency and an end to geographic monetisation exclusions, through which youth digital livelihoods can be shifted from holding patterns towards pathways during Africa's demographic transition.

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