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From Virtual Exile to Digital Futures: The Nigerian Entertainment Industry's Quest to Re-Enchant "Africa"

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Abstract

Amidst economic austerity and institutionalized gerontocracy and tribalism, Southern Nigerian youth experience persistent disillusionment with their national leadership. Global media has fueled a longing for a more viable "elsewhere"—a phenomenon popularly referred to as "virtual exile" or "mental secession" in the megacity of Lagos. Yet, young people also invest in digital technology with the hope of "making it from Africa." Over the past decade, Lagos has emerged as a global entertainment hub, propelled by the virality of Nigerian content on streaming and social media platforms. This article examines how algorithmic imaginaries interact with the phenomenology of place. It situates Nigerian engagement with digital media within Africanist histories of technology's incorporation into local cosmologies. It then presents empirical data collected through long-term ethnographic research in the Afrobeats industry, focusing on African and Afro-diasporic platform representatives on the one hand, and Lagos aspiring youth on the other. The article traces digital entrepreneurship's function as both an economic strategy and an ideological project—one that re-enchants places and futures that otherwise seem hopeless. As digital professionals seek to appeal to the "global" gaze, this article shows that their efforts operate largely inwardly by reshaping local subjectivities. Nigerian youth embrace new technology's promise of extraordinary transformation with an intentionality akin—and in many ways tied—to faith. Techno-optimist discourse can then be seen as a strategy from below to cultivate agency and commitment to place under systemic failure.

Keywords

Afrobeats; African digital culture; Afro-optimism; algorithmic imaginaries; digital platforms; Global South; Nigerian migration; techno-optimism

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1. Introduction

As Nigeria's commercial and entertainment capital, the coastal city of Lagos is enacted as a gateway to global markets in the worlding trajectory of Nigerian cultural production. "Lagos to the world," "Nigeria to the world," and "Africa to the world" are used interchangeably as slogans and prayers among the megacity's youth, as its digital content increasingly enters the transnational media landscape. Nigerian professionals are highly aware of digital circulation's power to project representations that shape the global imagination and intentionally harness social media's affordances to ground the symbols of economic development in African spaces. Self-described "brand influencer" Charity Ekezie states: "Africa has zero PR in the West," and frames this as the motivation for her humorous videos asserting the continent's modernity that earned her second place in TikTok's Top Creator 2022 Sub-Saharan Africa awards (Johnson, 2024). Nowhere is this logic more visible than with Afrobeats, the international name for Nigerian popular music that boomed through the use of digital production and distribution tools. Despite Afrobeats' early reliance on the Nigerian transnational ethnoscape and its increasing embeddedness in networks of global capital, symbolically charged narrative practices constantly re-center it in Lagos. For example, Spotify's Head of Music for Sub-Saharan Africa, while based in Dubai herself, writes in *The Guardian* about "The Nigerianification of the World: Why Lagos is now a Global Tastemaker City" (Okumu, 2022).

By conspicuously locating the viral music genre's commercial center in Africa's most populous city, African and Afro-diasporic professionals invert the representational dynamics governing the continent's place in the global economy. Literature on the neoliberal order has mostly featured "Africa" as a site of resource extraction by foreign actors, where productive enclaves are purposely disconnected from urban centers—offshore oil fields, remote mining sites, and deep forest concessions (Appel, 2012; Ferguson, 2006; Hendriks, 2021). This framing has gained renewed significance within critical discussions of "digital colonialism" (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Staab, 2024), in which African societies are often cast simply as grounds for extraction or experimentation (Gravett, 2020; Kwet, 2019; Obi, 2024). Against these placeless economic interactions, entertainment and platform professionals explicitly seek to construct Lagos as a space of youthful creativity and commercial potential in the digital era. To convey this potential, they sometimes even reappropriate the resource narrative underpinning Nigeria's status as Africa's largest oil producer. Thus, Nigerian artist and digital entrepreneur Mr. Eazi told his 4.6 million followers via an Instagram Story in January 2025: "Online marketing is like oil and gas if you do it right."

This article explores how efforts explicitly aimed at the external gaze end up operating inwardly, reshaping local subjectivities. Positive imaginative potential is scarce in Nigeria: Only 6 percent of youth surveyed in 2024 believe the country is moving in the right direction (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 19). Yet 89 percent expect their own standard of living to improve very soon (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 60). The article argues that digital technologies play a key role in producing this paradoxical situation. With an average of 4 hours and 36 minutes daily, Nigerians spend the longest time on social media in the world (DataReportal, 2023). On one hand, it heightens youths' frustrations with their local environment by exposing them to a steady stream of cosmopolitan lifestyles. On the other hand, social media fuels a discourse of personal possibility and visibility, sustaining the hope to "make it from Africa." Two-thirds of young Nigerians report that social media improves their mental health—by far the highest rate on the continent (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 111). Individual aspiration then becomes the locus of faith, mediated by digital platforms.

Capturing the nuances of African platform imaginaries and how they interact with the phenomenology of place requires qualitative, situated, and historically grounded analysis. The research takes the specificity of a leading site of African digital culture as starting point, drawing on a long-term ethnography of the Nigerian entertainment industry. The article first lays out the theoretical framework, drawing on both Africanist and media studies literature. Following a presentation of the methodology, it then traces recent historical shifts in Southern Nigeria, situating engagement with digital media at the juncture of political, economic, social, and religious dynamics. Empirical observations are presented next, followed by a brief discussion and conclusion. Together, the sections show that faith in digital media serves as a strategy to cultivate agency under systemic failure, enabling commitment to places that would otherwise seem hopeless.

2. Theoretical Framework

The article follows Wasserman's (2021, p. 21) call to "foreground the social" in African digital media studies. It implies resisting an a priori North–South hierarchy that would reduce African digital media participants into mere data. Instead, an epistemology that centers the situated signifying frameworks, political imaginaries, and social relations through which digital technologies are mobilized locally asserts their agency and dignity against long histories of data extraction (Wasserman, 2021, p. 30). In a similar vein, Newell and Pype (2021) argue that the decolonization of the virtual starts with the recovery and amplification of its conceptualization in African societies.

In *The Colony*, Mbembe (2006, p. 112) describes the pillars of "the metaphysics of life" in West and Central Africa as "the communal state between human beings on one side and, on the other, objects, nature, and invisible forces." He argues that this enduring pre-colonial division makes human beings the plaything of realities that surpass them, and notes that the form of this economy of subordination constantly changes. Since the pre-colonial era, West African systems of thought have indeed been characterized by constant reconfiguration and adaptation (Guyer, 1996). This dynamic remains particularly salient among the Yoruba, the dominant ethnic group in Lagos, who describe themselves as "traditionally" open to new practices and objects, as long as they are efficacious (Adedeji, 2010; Waterman, 1990). In 2016, in the Abiola lecture at the African Studies Association annual meeting in Washington, DC, Mbembe suggested a parallel between African cosmological understandings and cultural representations of digital social space.

There is indeed a general recognition that from the perspective of cultural narratives and political power, "technology often functions as magic" (Davis, 2015, p. 172). In Western contexts, the wonder, awe, and terror that it provokes has been described as the "technological sublime" (Nye, 1996). These deep-rooted cultural representations ground the social reception of complex, transformative, and "mythical" (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022) contemporary technologies such as algorithms. Pype (2012) already showed how communication technologies such as television, radio, and phones became embedded in bewitchment and healing practices in Central Africa, where technology is invested with spiritual qualities that in turn impact individual users. With the advance of the digital—a fortiori, artificial intelligence—technology everywhere is depicted as an "autonomous agent, a determinist force" that acts upon our societies (Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022, p. 864). It is tied to the notion of "rupture," which can fuel techno-optimist claims. As described by Mager and Katzenbach (2021), these claims are the product of contingent hype but have powerful effects in how they structure actors and resources. While these analyses operate from a Western perspective with governments, institutions, and private companies in mind, the faith in technology can also be mobilized from below.

As Newell and Pype (2021, p. 14) write, a guiding question for the decolonization of the virtual then becomes "who is playing with the technological possibilities" in African contexts, where states "often block rather than promote entrepreneurship." In this article, I approach it through the booming Nigerian entertainment industry, specifically music. As Seaver (2022) and Born (2022) remind us in their respective landmark studies of digitalization, the music industry serves a "prophetic" function by offering a testing ground for new technology, anticipating broader transformations. It was the first major sector of cultural production to confront the challenges and opportunities offered by the Internet (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). In Nigeria, it has also been the blueprint for mobilizing digital opportunities, as I will show in Section 4. Furthermore, music in Lagos has historically been intertwined with social change (Alaja-Browne, 1989; Waterman, 1990), making it a compelling heuristic entry point.

3. Methodology

The data presented in this article comes primarily from a long-term ethnography of the Nigerian entertainment industry. It consisted of interviews and sustained participant observation in Lagos (2018–2020) and online (2018–2025), following participants across networked online and offline spaces, as outlined in the methodological framework proposed by Lane and Marler (2022). Punctual research trips were also conducted in Paris, London, and Dubai (2021–2023). The research participants included: (a) African and Afro-diasporic entertainment and platform professionals at music streaming, distribution, aggregation, and downloading services, and (b) Lagos-based aspiring dancers, singers, and other creators of content (including bloggers, DJs, and behind-the-scenes photographers).

Part (a) centered on an ethnography of the Lagos office of Chinese-owned Boomplay—then Africa's leading music streaming platform, before being overtaken by Audiomack—where I followed participants for three months in 2019. It also draws on interviews and participant-observation with African and Afro-diasporic digital professionals across Lagos, Paris, London, and Dubai. These included notably professionals at American audio discovery platform Audiomack, Swedish music streaming platform Spotify, Nigerian music streaming platform UduX, American short-form video sharing platform Triller, Nigerian music downloading service NotJustOk, American digital music distributor Empire, and Nigerian music distributor and curator Ingle Mind Digital Concept. Semi-structured interviews lasting between one and three hours were conducted with 24 informants. The most substantive data was collected through participant-observation in semi-informal settings, including industry conferences, concerts, club nights, and other events where professional and social spheres overlapped, as well as through ongoing contact on social media. Some of these professionals had private social media profiles. All participants gave consent to take part in the research and be quoted. Where appropriate, quotes were anonymized, reflecting the moral relationship between anthropologist and informant, as outlined in the Ethical Guidelines 2021 of the Association of Social Anthropologists of the UK.

The aspiring entertainers in part (b) were aged 14 to 30, approximately two-thirds male, and lived mainly in the Lagos neighborhoods of Bariga, Mushin, and Agege. Some had university degrees, others had dropped out of school. Several had moved to Lagos alone, hoping to "make it." Only a few held formal employment. They were recruited through online contact, entertainment events, and snowball sampling. While a few participants were minors, they were not formally enrolled in the study and no personal data or quotations were collected from them. For others, consent to participate in the research was obtained orally.

No interviews were conducted, as such a format was unfamiliar and caused intimidation. Instead, data was gathered through direct observation, informal conversations, and "deep hanging out" (Geertz, 1998) during such occasions as dance rehearsals, studio sessions, content creation sessions, social gatherings, and while following participants throughout their day. I lived six months intermittently in Bariga, sharing a room with aspiring dance content creators, which provided direct access to community events and daily interactions. Participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms.

My work as a researcher was facilitated by the aspirational frameworks and the imaginaries of connectivity that this article addresses. The fact that I am not related to Nigeria through kinship or ethnic ties meant that I fit perfectly within the narrative—still largely performative in the late 2010s—that the Lagos entertainment industry was "going global." I was often introduced from one person to another as "someone from Oxford who has come to study how we do things here." "Study" in this context did not refer to the colonially charged study of the Other as a curiosity, but to the study of a successful model in order to learn and replicate it. My interlocutors' confident self-representation as upwardly mobile "entrepreneurs"—whether they were aspiring TikTok dancers or corporate professionals—made them very willing to engage with me. It was a way to both assert their position as knowledgeable experts who can "teach" a Western scholar, but also as part of their constant efforts toward self-actualization, at a time when a fantastic sense of opportunity pervaded the air, yet data was scarce.

The following section situates these ethnographic insights by drawing on historical sources and my interviews with industry pioneers to contextualize the emergence of the Afrobeats industry and the stakes of digital media engagement in Southern Nigeria.

4. Media, Privatization, and the Rise of Pentecostal Governmentality

4.1. Historical Backdrop

Nigeria, known as the "African Giant," gained independence from the UK in 1960. This ushered in a period of optimism grounded in the reappropriation of colonial positivist teleologies (Adebanwi & Obadare, 2010; Apter, 2005; Piot, 2010). The postcolonial vision of utopian modernization was bolstered by the discovery of oil in commercial quantities in the late 1960s (Ekanade, 2014; Frynas, 2000). During the 1970s, oil-fueled growth translated into visible infrastructural and institutional expansion (Apter, 2005). The oil economy fueled the rise of Nigeria's first music superstars, such as Ebenezer Obe and King Sunny Ade, whose success reflected the broader national euphoria. Corporations like Sony Music and EMI increased their presence in Lagos.

By the 1980s, a downturn in global oil prices exposed the fragility of the Nigerian economy. The ensuing fiscal crisis opened the door to a structural adjustment program (SAP) mandated by the International Monetary Fund (Anyanwu, 1992). These reforms, which emphasized privatization, deregulation, and fiscal austerity, dismantled the post-independence model of state-led development. One of the immediate casualties was the music industry. Foreign corporations withdrew, with Sony relocating to South Africa and EMI moving its regional headquarters to Abidjan (Servant, 2003, p. 34; see also Adedeji, 2010). Piracy proliferated, currency instability took hold, and the international infrastructure that had supported the Lagos scene unraveled. By the end of the decade, the local music ecosystem had largely collapsed.

The fate of Nigeria's vibrant cultural industries paralleled deep changes in national prospects. The once-expansive state could no longer absorb graduates into stable jobs, eroding the developmentalist social contract (Apter, 2005). The optimism of the postcolonial decades gave way to widespread feelings of disillusionment, articulated through the affective registers of loss and trauma. To this day, Nigerians often fondly remember the era of functioning public services—a time "when foreigners would come to Nigeria for medical treatment in our government hospitals"—alongside the world-famous cultural life. The collapse of the economy also led to the withdrawal of global consumer brands that had been part of the Nigerian commercial landscape since the colonial era, making them symbolic markers of a "lost" modernity (Piot, 2010). Liberalization reforms thus had a long-lasting impact, experienced both as material deprivation and a narrowing of the imagined possibilities tied to Nigeria.

Exclusion from the global economic order also deeply affected cultural identity through symbolic erasure (Ferguson, 2006). The privatization of TV and radio led to the proliferation of new channels, creating a demand largely filled by Western cultural imports (Akpan, 2006). Through South African intermediaries, American conglomerates such as Viacom saturated Nigerian media with US entertainment—especially music videos (Shonekan, 2013). As Africanists have noted, the SAP reinscribed colonial dynamics. The African subject was once again positioned as objectified and spoken for, rather than a speaking participant in global circuits of value and meaning (Ferguson, 2006; Marshall, 2009; Mbembe, 2006). The aggressive austerity measures and economic decline also triggered waves of emigration—primarily to the US and the UK (Mbegu & Pongou, 2010; Odoemene & Osuji, 2015)—compounding the feeling that sovereignty is located "elsewhere." There, young, educated Nigerians often encountered racialization and economic precarity, feeding a sense of symbolic exclusion and cultural marginality.

4.2. A Dual Contemporary Situation

The poverty and abjection that afflict Lagos have received considerable attention (Agbiboa, 2022; Koolhaas et al., 2000), as shown in evocative titles such as "Lagos: Surviving Hell" (Subirós, 2001) or the use of Lagos as a key illustration for Robert Kaplan's influential *The Coming Anarchy* (2000). Beyond these external representations, structural conditions shape the way in which people conceptualize their own environment, with "themes of insecurity" and "precarity" piecing together "a phenomenology of Lagos life" (Agbiboa, 2022, p. 124). In 2024, 85 percent of Nigerian youth reported plans to emigrate within three years (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 70). This collective longing for "the abroad" constitutes what Piot (2010) calls "virtual exile." In Lagos, it is commonly referred to as "mental secession," a state in which hope is channeled to the promise of foreign lands rather than local institutions. The "Nigerian factor" is widely believed to block self-actualization, discouraging people from investing effort or resources in their immediate environment.

Yet, almost 90 percent of Nigerian youth remain confident in their own success in the near future (Ichikowitz Family Foundation, 2024, p. 60). Pentecostal Christianity cultivates this sense of agency in the face of seemingly insurmountable collective challenges. In Meyer's words, it provides "the possibility of some sort of individualism and closure" (Meyer, 2009, p. 14). As elsewhere in Africa, economic liberalization in Nigeria was accompanied by the phenomenal rise and appeal of Pentecostal churches (Marshall, 2009; Obadare, 2016; Wariboko, 2014). Lagos, in particular, has been described as "the Pentecostal locomotive" of Africa (Quayson, 2010, p. 326). Pentecostalism celebrates the modern, the urban, and the transnational, encouraging believers to seize neoliberal capitalism's consumerist possibilities and media technologies

(Meyer, 2009; Quayson, 2010)—values that resonate in Africa's entertainment capital. Accordingly, the pursuit of accumulation is not only normalized but morally elevated.

4.3. The Rise of Nigerian Digital Entertainment

All the trends above have collided in the digital age, spawning the Afrobeats movement. Since the 2010s, Nigerian artists have come to dominate the African and global pop music scene—a historical reversal so remarkable that even skeptics of Pentecostal claims about thaumaturgic power might call it a miracle. Afrobeats tracks regularly chart worldwide and have reached number one positions across Asia, Europe, and Latin America, propelled by digital platforms and viral social media circulation. When Spotify launched in 85 new markets in 2021, Nigeria alone accounted for 15 percent of the newly added artists on the platform (Spotify, 2022). Nigerian artists now make up 61 percent of all music streams in the country—the highest share for domestic artists in Africa and the Middle East (Luminate, 2025).

Tracing its origins to the late-1990s Lagos scene, Afrobeats emerged at the convergence of post-SAP economic realities and the rise of accessible digital technology. Cassettes of American and Caribbean music, along with home studio equipment, initially arrived through the expanding diasporic networks. Nigerian youths then used Digital Audio Workstations to produce rhythm-driven, densely layered tracks that hybridized hip hop, dancehall, and West African genres like highlife and fuji. Early local circulation was fueled by pirated mixtapes, emerging private Nigerian and continental radio and TV channels, and diaspora-oriented satellite media. Launched in 2006 by US-based Nigerian computer engineer Demola Ogundele, the music downloading platform NotJustOK connected the diaspora with the booming Lagos scene, fostering the sense of a shared transnational space in Nigeria and of positive identification among the diasporic African middle class (Shipley, 2013). This would later support the industry's globalization.

These flows took a new turn with the advent of digital platforms as distribution tools. While Lagos artists and record labels initially uploaded their content online without a particular strategy, algorithms propelled Nigerian cultural production to the world. Launched in 2005, YouTube played a major, albeit unintentional, role in the mass popularization of Nigerian music. Over time, circulation expanded through the recommendation systems of music streaming platforms, and more recently through social media, where viral dance challenges and user-generated content have become key drivers of Afrobeats' visibility. In recent years, the function of platforms has shifted from passive intermediaries to active participants in African music industries, pushing Nigerian content to global subscribers through targeted campaigns developed with artists' teams and influencers. This shift has been driven in large part by African and Afro-diasporic professionals who enthusiastically steered platform expansion into the continent, as the next section will explore.

5. Empirical Observations

5.1. African and Afro-Diasporic Platform Professionals

The internalized—yet contested—(in)visibility of "Africa's giant" runs deep for a generation whose lifeworld has been shaped by the global offensive of corporate media at the turn of the millennium. Most influential Nigerian platform professionals are in their early 40s. A recurring theme in interviews and personal conversations is

the memory of international music—mainly American, British, and Jamaican hits—blasting throughout Lagos as they were growing up. This backdrop is invoked as motivation or to emphasize how dramatically things have changed. Temitope Omole, senior director at the Digital Acceleration Office for Africa at The Coca-Cola Company, recalls: "You just can't imagine how it was back in the day. You'd go to a wedding in Surulere [then a middle-class Lagos neighborhood], and you wouldn't hear a single Nigerian song. Now it's the opposite!" She previously worked on the development of the music platform Cloud 9 by Emirati-owned telecom operator Etisalat in Nigeria, and views that role through a patriotic lens. She states: "Talented Nigerians were given an opportunity for the first time."

This shift holds significant affective value for middle-class corporate professionals, who were particularly exposed to international media representations through a cosmopolitan upbringing. Many spent extensive periods in the UK or the US and commonly recall: "It really wasn't cool being African growing up. You would always try to lie and say you're Jamaican." Oyebowale Akideinde exemplifies this cohort. Currently General Manager of Digital Products & Innovation at the Indian telecom group Airtel, he previously led OTT music services at South Africa's MTN—where he set up the Music Time digital platform—after serving as regional director at Boomplay. Akideinde studied computer science in the UK, identifies as a "hip hop head," and was also strongly influenced by British grime. He explains: "You know how hip hop was born in the Bronx, then evolved and was the first Black genre to go global, so Afrobeats is the next thing like that." While developing Boomplay in 2018, he described his efforts to obtain the rights of international artists to me in the following terms: "We want to also have foreign artists on the platform, so you can have Wizkid next to a Beyoncé and people will see that they are on the same level." With contemporary Nigerian pop and gospel artists eclipsing any Western or Caribbean star among African grassroots consumers—Boomplay's target market—this business strategy is framed around categorical equality rather than profitability.

Human leadership of digital platforms is constantly foregrounded as the site of power in informal conversations with African practitioners. Informants often highlight the importance of personal connection in processes of algorithmic recommendation and virality. For example, an executive at a music streaming platform described:

> All the artists, they try to get my number. They know that if they can get in touch with me and I like their new song, we can work something out. I can make you #1 in your country, I can make you top 10 in Africa, we know how to do those things.

Spotify's Head of Music for Sub-Saharan Africa, Phiona Okumu, publicly declared: "Spotify is as much a tech-driven company as it is a cultural champion." Such affirmative rhetoric signals a discursive break for platforms, away from the "implied neutrality" (Gillespie, 2010) of simple intermediaries.

Recent high-profile appointments at international platforms and the efflorescence of local platforms across Africa have been steeped in the language of identity and cultural affirmation. Many of the African professionals operating in those spaces have a background in the continent's music industries and continue to see themselves as cultural brokers, rather than "tech professionals." Presenting themselves publicly as "stakeholders" in the continent's emergence, they frame technology as a conjunctural vehicle for cultural agency. For example, Charlotte Bwana, currently vice president of marketing and brand strategy EMEA at Audiomack, was part of Nigerian superstar Davido's team before her corporate career. During our interview,

she framed platforms' intervention as necessary and generative. Having helped launch Audiomack's first African office in Lagos, she passionately justified her role at the American tech company: "We're creating jobs in Africa, creating African playlists, pushing local African artists to global audiences. We're also organizing events locally, supporting festivals, funding studio sessions." When pressed on the structural inequalities shaping global platform governance, she balanced it with the urgent need for the material resources that digital corporations can bring to African creative industries and youth-driven economies. She emphasized the importance of her own positionality as an African professional, stating: "If we're not doing it, nobody will….*They* don't care about Africa."

These actors navigate power imbalances and ideological ambiguities by framing their role as part of a broader, often spiritually inflected, world-making project. Bwana, for example, concluded the interview with: "I feel I am walking in my purpose. Honestly, I believe it was a calling." In private conversations and on social media, they commonly refer to God—for example, soundtracking posts about their work with gospel songs. One Nigerian regional executive who moved from a Chinese-owned streaming platform to an American digital distribution service posted a picture in front of their new office, captioned: "May God help us all find our purpose and live impactful lives acceptable in the sight of God." Many peers commented "Amen" or "God bless our journeys." Another senior figure at a multinational digital distribution company captioned a concert picture of a Nigerian client performing at a major London venue with: "I believe God has positioned me to help bring Africa's sound into developed markets to advance our artists' global opportunities. This is just the beginning of the work ahead. Keep believing." During interviews, these professionals often explain that they publicly display their corporate success for "inspiration."

A large painting titled *Inspiration* hangs in the Lagos office of Tega Oghenejobo, chief operating officer of Nigeria's Mavin Records and cousin to its co-founder and popular icon Don Jazzy. It depicts Don Jazzy among Elon Musk, Jack Ma, Jeff Bezos, and other global figures. Oghenejobo explained that the painting aims to counteract a period of foreign-dominated references:

> Growing up, the media was saturated with foreigners that we took as role models; our goal is for the new generation to have Nigerians they can look up to. Don Jazzy is a visionary; he's someone who can inspire young Nigerians.

Nigerian entertainment professionals are indeed followed by masses of youths, many of whom are seeking pathways out of poverty—and often also out of the country. With 15 million Instagram followers, Don Jazzy self-consciously hammers that, thanks to digital platforms, youths are just one post away from success, even in Nigeria. For example, in a video from 27 September 2025 viewed nearly a million times, he recounts how he discovered the now Grammy-nominated singer Ayra Starr as he was talent scouting on social media. He was looking to create a "teenage Afrobeats superstar from Nigeria that we want to make sure goes global," and noticed a short video she posted of herself freestyling. He explains: "So I went to her, and I entered her DM; I said, hello, how are you?… After a couple of hours, she responded, and we took it from there."

5.2. Lagos's Aspiring Youth

Jay Star came alone to Lagos from Nigeria's troubled South-South Region at 18, hoping for a career as a professional singer. Upon arrival, he worked odd jobs such as bricklayer and gateman before securing a

videographer role, producing behind-the-scenes social media content for entertainment professionals. At 27, he still lives hand to mouth, often sleeping at the company's office or on nightclub couches. In 2019, just before Nigerian songs achieved global virality on TikTok, he already asserted enthusiastically: "Everyone wants to listen to African music now, Wizkid is the hottest artist in the world." When I questioned this, he insisted: "You don't know that? If you check online, you will see." Such statements reflect the algorithmic logic of the filter bubble, in which recommendation systems amplify perceived global reach beyond measurable scale, well documented in political content studies (Chueca Del Cerro, 2024; Dylko et al., 2017; Rhodes, 2022; Spohr, 2017). Shipley (2013) showed over a decade ago how West African digital sociality fosters a magnified sense of Afrobeats' reach, shaped by algorithmic experiences of diasporic proximity. It became clear to me, however, that declarations like Jay Star's were meant to be performative rather than factual.

During fieldwork, this kind of aspirational hyperbole around online virality was common, as youths were seeking to convince themselves—as much as me—of the validity of their hopes. When asked about their future goals, aspiring artists regularly invoked the figures of Wizkid, Davido, or Burna Boy as precedents, and then articulated their own ambitions in phrases like: "I want to be the biggest global pop star the world has ever seen," "I want people in America and all the way to China and India to listen to me," or "Now with social media it's possible for Africans, you know." Recurrently, they would resort to the standard phrase, "I want to put Africa [/Lagos/Nigeria] on the map."

This assertive faith in algorithms was even more pronounced among aspiring dancers, whose hopes for mobility rest almost entirely on social media. Street dance is central to Nigerian social life and highly influential in popular culture, yet it scarcely exists as an industry. With no formal infrastructure, dancers survive through precarious, adaptive strategies while waiting to "blow." Before TikTok's boom, most worked in the music industry, where their labor was undervalued and their creativity tightly constrained. Dance crazes nonetheless drove Nigerian music's virality and transnational appeal, often inspiring artists to build songs around specific moves. This dynamic intensified around 2020, when platforms like Triller and TikTok began actively promoting Nigerian content, rewarding artists who generated global engagement. Several dancers, in turn, gained international visibility online and ways to monetize their influence.

Yet, for most, material circumstances remain extremely harsh, and dance remains stigmatized in Nigerian society. Choreographers and video directors warn younger ones that their profession will hurt their marriage prospects. Against such realities, the open-ended promise of social media becomes both a survival strategy and a moral resource. As one male dancer explained:

> Nigerian girls, they want someone who has either money or a dream and faith in God. If you have faith, God will push your content and there is no limit to what you can achieve. Nigerian women, they understand that.

Structurally, digital platforms offer the idea of local agency against the previously devastating recognition of being at the bottom end of the value chain locally, and being picked up by foreign actors as the only prospect. A widely respected 33-year-old dancer, who still lived precariously at the time of the fieldwork, saw social media as a key tool for community organizing, asserting leadership through the amplification of its possibilities. He explained to me:

> You have these White women at [an art NGO operating in Nigeria] who think they know better than us what is good for us. The dancers go to London and whatnot, meanwhile, they come back and they're still dirt poor. We were kept ignorant here, it makes me sick! If I grow my Instagram, organizing dancers here, the sponsors will see us, and that's real money.

By the time of writing, his community page had gained half a million followers on TikTok and sponsorship from Coca-Cola. Yet his personal circumstances remained uncertain and the pull of relocating abroad was constantly in the back of his mind, despite the faith he displayed in front of younger dancers.

The affordances of social media (Abidin, 2021; Lin & de Kloet, 2019) and the discourse of possibility around it (Bishop, 2020; Hoffmann et al., 2018) offer a sense of individual and collective emancipation that is morally and spiritually valued locally—akin to a religious belief structure. The religious dimension of social media aspiration is often explicit. For instance, under the posts of successful artists, Nigerian users frequently comment prayers: "My song will go viral this year by God's grace, Amen." These receive dozens of replies echoing "Amen." Faith in one's potential to "blow" online can drive creative labor and even materialize as its narrative core. This is well illustrated by Idaham's 2019 breakout song "Billion Dollar," whose lyrics went:

> *Eledumare* [God almighty] / Give me give me billon dollar / … / *Oluwa I dey beg oh* [God, I beg you] / Open my way for me oh / Open my way / *Oluwa I dey beg oh*

The artist explained in a private conversation:

> The song is kind of a tool, you know? People can use it as a script on their spiritual journey, to start the day with God. They should listen and repeat it every day.

As the song gained traction on social media, young Nigerians resonated with its functional logic. Some comments read: "This is what Nigerians need to hear right now!! Inspirational music. We can all make it," or "This song is my daily prayer, every morning. So helpful, especially to someone trying to make it in the entertainment industry."

5.3. Transmitting Faith

The belief in algorithmic visibility as a path to salvation *from Nigeria* is institutionalized through industry efforts that constantly target youths with these messages. Educational podcasts, training academies, and public events organized by entertainment professionals frame social media as a horizon of possibility within a new moral economy of self-realization. One illustration is the No Limits Conference: An Empowerment Initiative, held in Lagos in October 2019. Presented as a social justice event, the conference promoted a vision of empowerment that explicitly rejected structural explanations for inequality, instead emphasizing personal effort, moral and religious discipline, and the strategic use of social media. For example, comedian Omotunde Adebowale David, known as Lolo, proclaimed:

> The biggest mistake you can make is blame where you started for your lack of success. It's the silliest excuse. Wherever you plant a seed, it's still a tomato. A lot of you like success, but you hate to work. Post things on your phone, don't just watch. Are you building capacity, or just watching people's lives on your phone? You want God's grace, but you can't wipe his shoes.

This rhetoric positions young Nigerians as "subjects of capacity" and social media as a "site of capacity" (McRobbie, 2007), where their efforts can translate into tangible rewards and recognition. It recasts digital visibility as a marker of agency, embedded in a religious logic that challenges traditional institutions and government-led developmentalism that failed to lift Nigerians out of poverty. The conference speeches and panels articulated this shift through a motivational approach that was self-consciously similar in tone to Pentecostal preaching. Gender-queer model and media personality Denrele thus sought to energize the crowd:

> You see now, you are in an era where your difference is your content. What is your content? How are you monetizing your content? Young people can build brands that resonate and create campaigns that go viral. This is empowering. What are you doing?!

Responding to concerns from the audience about increasing competition, the speakers doubled down on the inspirational register. Pioneer choreographer Kaffy, a "godmother" for Lagos rising dancers, explained:

> We needed to go to the office and give the demo. Today with social media it's easy; you have a platform. You don't need to know somebody. You are in the eyes of the world. There's never been an easier time than now for Africans!

Veteran rapper Ruggedman added: "I can't even count the number of people who have become successful by just posting one-minute videos on their phones, right here from Lagos."

These discourses resonate with local realities, where psychological survival is widely believed to be a priority. As I meet with young Nigerian dancers, it is not uncommon to hear them greet each other with: "Ah-ah, you still *dey* here? You no *dey japa*." *Japa* is a street slang that means to run swiftly out of a dangerous place, which has come to refer to Nigeria itself. Jay Starr himself recurrently evokes the prospect of turning 30 and the fear of not having "time" to reach success. "People die young nowadays," he explains; "If I die tomorrow, I'll have nothing to leave behind, it'll be like I was never here at all." The thought of risking his life on the perilous road to Europe has often crossed his mind. He is scared, but he also believes that if he "hustles" hard enough, the entertainment industry can offer him better prospects in Lagos.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

While part of corporate expansion strategies, platforms' discourse and practices in Nigeria take a specific form shaped by the historically grounded ideologies and social configurations that have structured the subject position of their key actors. The empirical data sheds light on the agency of African and Afro-diasporic platform professionals who have contributed to recoding tech infrastructures as aligned with African youth's aspirations. They mobilize the transformative power generally invested in technology, embedding it in a situated religious imaginary. These actors blur market logic with cultural agency, advancing claims rooted in local contexts within corporate structures.

Ethnographic data reveals that where African digital professionals are most influential, yet, is in mediating a brand of techno-capitalist utopianism. They shape perceptions of "Africa" as a site of dynamic cultural potential where digital futures can unfold. This process is largely turned inward. Spiritual rhetoric

resonates within prevailing aspirational economies. It is operationalized through faith in the power of algorithms to offer life-changing virality to Lagos' youth. While typically spawned and exported globally by Silicon Valley (Gillespie, 2010; Hoffmann et al., 2018) and international institutions (Friederici et al., 2017), techno-optimistic imaginaries are thus reappropriated by diverse local actors who tailor them for grassroots youth.

Lagos plays a strategic role in this process, both materially and symbolically. The city is enacted as a gateway to global markets—reconfigured from a horizon of dysfunction into a signifier of African cool, modernity, and cosmopolitanism, propelled by digital circuits. Afrobeats, whose digital streams come about half from the US, UK, and France, then becomes a paradigmatic world-making tool—even as it remains entangled in the (post)colonial dynamics of global capitalism. Through digital culture, an African megacity is positioned within what Mbembe (2016, p. 322) calls a "new, de-centered but global, history," feeding the aspirational horizon of an Africa-based project of modernity and globalization at a time when most youths are tempted to give up entirely.

This vision draws on the ideological remnants of the "Africa rising" narrative of the mid-2010s, a pan-African capitalist imaginary carried by highly educated cosmopolitan Africans, later reframed by Nigerian scholars as "Africapitalism" (Amaeshi et al., 2018; Edozie, 2017). Its proponents mobilized the performative dimensions of investment capitalism to present "Africa" as a land of opportunity. This challenged the entrenched global imagination of "Africa" as a negative "category through which a 'world' is structured" (Ferguson, 2006, p. 5). Turning the economic gaze to neoliberal capitalism's "next frontier," "Africa rising" momentarily reenchanted financial markets during the post-2008 crisis, when global faith in the economic system was deeply shaken (Gabay, 2018; Mizes & Donovan, 2022; Roitman, 2021).

In a similar way that "Africa rising" revitalized faith in a discredited financial capitalism by hyping up its potential positive impact for the continent, the new form of performativity enabled by digitally mediated culture offers a positive vision of platforms amid widespread distrust caused by accusations of neocolonial extraction (Kwet, 2019), algorithmic racial bias (Noble, 2018), and amplification of inequality (Heeks, 2021). African digital professionals reinvigorate data capitalism by mobilizing an Afro-optimist lens propelled by the performance of faith and the genuine belief in miraculous algorithmic reach. To re-enchant "Africa," they reappropriate and repackage the datafication of culture as an opportunity for global export for a youth traumatized by exclusion.

Born out of the need to reinvent a future after devastating SAPs, Lagos youth's engagement with the digital has consistently pushed back against a positioning at the margins of both their gerontocratic society and the international order. The adoption and integration of new technology into local cosmologies allowed for the "ordinariness of extraordinary aspirations" (Weiss, 2009, p. 38). The potentiality of virality in the near future now fills what Guyer (2007) described as the gap between an instantaneous and unbearable present and a long-term prospect of salvation. As such, it shifts representations of emancipatory paths from migration routes to digital futures that can be constructed from Lagos.

Literature on place marketing generally postulates that "branding messages are designed by advertising agencies on the basis of indications of local policy-makers, with limited connections to the inhabitants, their feelings and their desires" (Vanolo, 2017, p. 77). In Lagos, however, authorities find themselves catching up

with a movement they did not initiate and only began to support recently. The virality of Afrobeats has thus already turned the megacity into what CNN describes as a "global winter tourism hub" (Ntuli, 2025). This provides a partial response to Newell and Pype's (2021) question about the drivers of Africa's digital turn when gerontocratic states seek to maintain the status quo. The article has shown how circumstantial alignments emerge. It described how African platform professionals and aspiring youths both engage in place-making in the vacuum left by failing governments, mobilizing digital technology to reconfigure their environment from a place to escape into one of creativity and opportunity.

Conflict of Interests
The author declares no conflict of interest.

Data Availability
In order to protect the confidentiality of participants, the data are not publicly available.

LLMs Disclosure
No large language models were used in the research or analysis conducted for this article, only for minor word-processing assistance such as proofreading and wording fixes.

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