

Conquering Unemployment Through Opportunities in Digital Economy: An Empirical Study of Nigeria and Kenya

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Abstract

The unemployment rates in Nigeria and Kenya, just like most less developed countries have been relatively high, even though the emerging economy referred to as digital economy offers a promising option towards addressing the issue. This has prompted scholars into researching on the issues and potentials in the digital economy, especially through opinion papers. This poses the need for a more empirical approach to investigating matters of optimizing employment in both countries through the digital economy. The study was on conquering unemployment in Nigeria and Kenya through opportunities in digital economy by employing empirical procedures. The study adopted employed descriptive survey design, with two research questions answered. The sample size of 1,000 digital professionals and enthusiasts were selected through the convenient sampling technique. An online structured survey, 'Unemployment, Digital Skills and Digital Economy Questionnaire (UDSDEQ)' was deployed for the data collection. Face validation of the instrument was carried out while Cronbach alpha method was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument, with satisfactory reliability coefficients: 0.76 and 0.89. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistic, specifically the weighted mean and tables. Results revealed among others that the digital skills that must be acquired in order to

become gainfully employable in the digital economy are cybersecurity and data privacy skills; digital and social media marketing; augmented reality, virtual reality and animations/video editing; artificial intelligence and machine learning; data science, analysis and visualization, et cetera. With this, the teaming unemployed youths have a clue on the best and salable digital skills to acquire in order to stand any chance of being gainfully employed in the emerging economy. Public-private partnership was envisaged towards addressing the challenges limiting the digital economy from engaging most of the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya.

Keywords: *Unemployment, Digital Economy, Digital Skills, Digital Professionals and Enthusiasts, Nigeria, Kenya.*

1.0 Introduction and problem statement

Digital revolution is reshaping economies around the globe, propelling growth, generating employment opportunities and introducing innovations at an extraordinary rate. Similarly, Babalola (2024) asserted that digital transformation is more than a buzzword and a revolution that is reshaping every facet of business and society, making its integration into all operational and service delivery almost indispensable. Babalola points out that a recent study predicts the global digital economy will soar to \$23 trillion by 2025, underscoring the immense transformative potential of digital technologies. Meanwhile, for developing nations, such as Nigeria and Kenya, digital transformation presents a golden and enviable opportunity to unlock new economic prospects, boost productivity, and create employment opportunities for the teaming unemployed citizenry. Orji (2024) noted that digital transformation holds the key to addressing unemployment crisis in developing nations, including Nigeria and Kenya, especially in the area of job creation, optimization of employment, and fostering economic growth. For this reason, Orji identified prominent skill areas that guarantee employment in digital economy to include, but are not limited to: Dev Ops; Internet of Things (IoT); Digital marketing and collaborations; Game development, Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR); Cybersecurity; Artificial intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning; Data Analysis and Visualization; User Interface design (UI), User Experience design (UX) and 3D printing; Blockchain; Quantum/Cloud computing; wireless power, and animation. In essence, by leveraging digital technologies Nigeria and Kenya could unlock new opportunities for its youth. There is no doubt that embracing digital transformation is not just a technological shift but a possible remedy to the worrisome issue of unemployment in both countries.

It is in recognition of the undeniable potentials in the digital economy that the Government of Nigeria recently released the National Digital Economy Policy and Strategy 2020-2030 document, which seeks to reorient the Nigerian economy to capitalize on the numerous opportunities that digital technology offers. This strategy intends to leverage digital technology to drive growth in every segment of the economy. Adio-Adepoju (2024) stated that the Nigerian Digital Economy Policy and Strategy program is based on eight pillars, namely: developmental regulation; digital literacy and skills; solid infrastructure; service infrastructure; digital services development and promotion; soft infrastructure; digital society and emerging technologies; and indigenous content development and adoption. These pillars if effectively adhered to will

undoubtedly help Nigeria address most of the issues surrounding unemployment. In relation to the forgoing, Ofozoba, et al. (2023) recommended that the Nigerian labour market should maintain a process that ensures personnel are employed based on factors such as IT skills and creativity, rather than just paper qualifications. In pursuance of the IT and digital skills and competencies, the Government has made several efforts. Yilwatda (2024) noted that the Nigerian Federal Ministry of Information and National Orientation in 2022 reported that the Government of Nigeria had signed a Memorandum of Understanding with China's Huawei on an "ICT for Change" Training Program to provide capacity building for Nigerian youth and federal civil servants. He further pointed out that the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) had also launched the JICA-Nigeria ICT Program, in which JICA works with Nigerian government entities to offer ICT training and technical assistance.

In a similar effort, the Nigerian digital ecosystem under the Global Gateway program plays host to the EU-Nigeria Digital Economy Package (2021-2024) for which the EU announced it would invest at least €820 million in Nigeria's digital transformation by providing assistance for Nigeria's digitization plan through a mix of €160 million in grants and €660 million in loans. The interest being to assist with investments in digital infrastructure, the digitalization of public services, digital entrepreneurship, digital skills, and digital governance. In another report, Yilwatda (2024) noted that in 2021 Microsoft entered into a national partnership with the Nigeria government to train five million youth across the country in technical skills, not to mention Google that has participated in several programs in Nigeria, including the Google Africa Developer Scholarship program and Digital Skills for Africa program, which provides training in mobile and web development. In May 2023, Cisco signed a deal with Nigeria's National Information Technology Development Agency (NITDA) to bridge Nigeria's digital divide and launched a new EDGE (Experience Design Go-to-market Earn) Center in Lagos that provides incubation programs for SMEs. The Cisco Network Academy is also a partner in the 3MTT program that is current running (Orji, 2024), and it is understandable that Kenya is not losing sight at exploiting the opportunities in digital economy.

Kenya is considered to be one of the ten fastest growing digital economies in the world, and a leader on the continent when it comes to access to digital infrastructure (Ennatu, 2023). Ennatu underscored the importance of Kenyan National Digital Master Plan 2022-2032, which might be referred to as Digital Economy Blueprint, developed with Smart Africa, which builds on the identifies digital skills of ICT professionals as one of the key pillars of the digital economy in Kenya. Similarly, Orji (2024) stressed that the government has also promised to train 20 million citizens in digital skills (300,000 civil servants and 350,000 teachers), through the Presidential Digital Talent Graduate Internship, with the private sector is also providing digital skills to unemployed Kenyans. For instance, Microsoft and Safaricom (with universities and tech hubs) are running the Digital Talent Programme that will train around 1,000 citizens on the most demanded digital skills, including cybersecurity, Fintech and cloud computing. It is projected that the digital economy is expected to contribute to 9.24% of the country's GDP by 2025 with M-Pesa as a leading platform in formal financial services, offering phone-based money transfers. This makes M-Pesa a strong force in the digital economy, based on the record that 98% of Kenyans use mobile money with 65% having access to the internet (Ennatu, 2023).

However, despite the efforts of Nigeria and Kenya, there is still alarming challenges, making it difficult for the sector to absorb the increasing unemployed populace. Some scholars, Adio-Adepoju (2024); Babalola (2024); Michael (2024) observed that in Nigeria, the rise of joblessness and high unemployment rate of about 33.3%, perhaps due to mismatched skills, lack of employability skills, lack of work experience, lackadaisical attitude to internships, volunteering, and apprenticeships in digital oriented training programs. Throwing more light to the issue, Oparaugo (2023) lamented that more than 100 million young people are not prepared to take up good job opportunities that require such modern skills. Oparaugo cried out that the 2023 survey conducted by GetBundi Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), and Digital Skill Education Technology Company, involving 100 NYSC members showed that only 19 of them had any form of digital skill. This might be because Nigerian curriculum planners seem not to have tailored her curriculum and education contents to be compatible with of the global market (Ofozoba, et al. (2023)).

The problem is similar to those of Kenya, as Ennatu (2023) observed that despite new digital skills projects led by the Kenyan government, the private sector and international partners, the digital skills sector receives too little attention and funding, there are not enough professionals with advanced digital skills for its growing digital economy job market, it lacks sufficient high-level digital skills, and there is still relatively low uptake of mobile internet, especially among women, especially in vulnerable communities and rural areas which remain largely unconnected or use only basic digital services. This means a large number of people cannot use digital tools to access the market or government digital services. For example, of the 44% self-employed Kenyans and business owners already using digital services to support their businesses, only 15-18% use advanced digital services. There is also a noticeably dearth of empirical literature focusing on unemployment and digital economy with a combination of Nigeria and Kenya as case study. A lot of the consulted literature were basically opinion papers. Thus, the study is centered on conquering unemployment in Nigeria and Kenya through opportunities in digital economy by employing empirical procedures.

1.1 Purpose of the study

The general purpose of the examine how to conquer unemployment in Nigeria and Kenya through opportunities in digital economy by employing empirical procedures. Specifically, the study sought to:

1. determine the challenges limiting digital economy from its potential of absorbing most of the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya.
2. Identify the digital skills that the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya must acquire to become gainfully employable in the digital economy.

1.2 Research questions

The following questions were provided answers to in the study:

1. What are the challenges limiting digital economy from its potential of absorbing most of the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya?
2. What digital skills must the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya acquire to become gainfully employable in the digital economy?

2. Conceptual Clarification

Unemployment

Unemployment is a situation in which people that are willing and able to work cannot find any gainful employment (Edewor & Kollie, 2022). Corroborating further, National Bureau of Statistics, cited in Orji (2024) describes an unemployed person as someone between the age bracket, 15 to 64 years, who is capable and willing to work but unable to obtain any work or works less than 40 hours within a reference period of 7 days. Hence, for this study, unemployment is considered as situational experience that occur when a person is willing and ready to work, and has made efforts to be gainfully engaged but cannot be employed for different reasons, such as lack of relevant skills, lack of experience, employment politics and favouritism, et cetera.

Digital Economy

Digital economy can also be referred to as emerging economy. It may be viewed as a variety of economic, commercial and technological activities that depend on digital and internet related platforms for its operations. Similarly, European Commission, cited in Adio-Adepoju (2024) defines digital economy as encompassing businesses that sell goods and services via the internet, and digital platforms that connect spare capacity and demand. This implies that digital economy has to do with the buying and selling of goods and services, and other economic related affairs that are reliant on digital and internet architecture to succeed. In this study, it will mean all the economic activities and value creations that are fundamentally driven by the internet, technology and digital infrastructure.

Digital Skills

Digital skills entail a range of abilities to use digital devices, communication applications, and networks to access and manage information for economic and other benefit (Orji, 2024). Throwing more light to the forgoing, UNESCO stressed that digital skills enable people to create and distribute digital content, communicate and collaborate, and solve problems for effective and creative self-fulfillment in life, learning, work, and social activities. For this study, digital skills entail the abilities, proficiencies and competencies to use digital platforms and technologies to create content, share, communicate, and manage information in a way that will be meaningful to the society, community, organization and or individuals.

Digital Professionals and Enthusiasts (DPEs)

Digital professionals are experts who have demonstrated competence in applying digital and technological skills, methods and ethics in designing, building and or digitally driven products and services in a manner that meet the need of the society. Australian Public Service Commission (2024) considers digital professionals as comprising those who apply digital skills, methodology and technology to design, build and/or maintain digital government products and services. The digital enthusiasts are often those with keen interest in exploring and exploiting the potentials of digital architecture to develop, create and or sale digital products and services for different reasons. For this study, digital professionals and enthusiasts are referred to as individuals, experts or not who are interested and passionate about making the most of digital technologies for various and suitable reasons.

3. Method

The study adopted a qualitative approach, and specifically employed descriptive survey design. Tanny (2018) considers the design as one of the research blueprints in which a researcher administers a survey on a sample or to the entire population of people, known as respondents, in order to elicit relevant data that could help in describing and providing systematic explanations to the attitudes, opinions, behaviours and or characteristics of the population on a matter being studied. The relative high unemployment rate in both Nigeria and Kenya and the population of digital professionals and enthusiasts (DPEs) being targeted for the investigation makes a descriptive survey design suitable. With the design, the data collected from a sample of targeted respondents will provide guidance in describing the factors challenging digital economy in Nigeria and Kenya from absorbing some unemployed, as well as highlighting critical digital skills needed to become gainfully employed in the digital economy.

The targeted population of the study comprised all the digital professionals and enthusiasts (DPEs) in Nigeria and Kenya. The sample size of 1,000 digital professionals and enthusiasts were selected through the convenient sampling technique. Orji (2023) considers convenient sampling technique as the sampling procedure that permits a researcher to administer research instrument(s) to respondents who are ready, availing and willing to respond to the instrument within the time-lag of the data collection exercise. The sample was composed of 500 respondents from Nigeria and 500 respondents from Kenya.

An online structured survey, 'Unemployment, Digital Skills and Digital Economy Questionnaire (UDSDEQ)' was deployed for the data collection. The instrument which has two sections, A and B was developed based on review of some related literature and consultation with some digital professionals and enthusiasts. The section A focused on basic data of respondents, such as country of origin and designation. Section B has two clusters, namely: cluster 1 (challenges of limiting digital economy from absorbing some unemployed) and cluster 2 (relevant digital skills to acquire to become employable in the digital economy). The section B contains 20 items which is structured on four points rating scale of Strongly Agree (SA), Agree (A), Disagree (D) and Strongly Disagree (SD), with weighted points: 4, 3, 2 and 1 respectively.

The face validation of the instrument was carried out while Cronbach alpha method was used to determine the internal consistency of the instrument. Reliability coefficients: 0.76 and 0.89 were obtained for clusters 1 and 2, respectively. In line with Nworgu (2015) who recommended that co-efficient value of 0.60 and above is adequate for any research work, the instrument is deemed satisfactory and suitable for the investigation.

The researchers sought for and solicited for the cooperation of different WhatsApp groups of digital professionals and enthusiasts in Nigeria and Kenya through the group administrators towards responding to the questionnaire. They were assured of the objectivity of the exercise, as well as safety and privacy of the responses. The exercise lasted for two weeks, after the required number of responses were reached accordingly.

The data was analyzed using descriptive statistic, specifically the weighted mean and tables. In analysing the questionnaire items, the remark was to consider mean rating that fell below 2.50 as not accepted, while mean rating of 2.50 or above was taken to indicate accepted.

4. Result and interpretation

Research Question 1: What are the challenges limiting digital economy from its potential of absorbing most of the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya?

Table 1

Mean rating of digital professional and enthusiasts on the challenges limiting digital economy from absorbing most of the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya.

S/N: Perceived challenges limiting the digital economy from absorbing most of the unemployed:	Nigerian DPE (n=500)		Kenyan DPE (n=500)	
	Mean	Remark	Mean	Remark
1. inadequate digital skills training centers and platforms	2.81	Accepted	2.73	Accepted
2. inadequate digitally skilled manpower to be employed as trainers and or typical work	2.80	Accepted	2.90	Accepted
3. poor and unreliable internet infrastructure	2.80	Accepted	2.83	Accepted
4. extremely limited access to digital training centers by those in vulnerable and rural localities	2.69	Accepted	2.76	Accepted
5. high cost and non-affordability of digital skills trainings	2.84	Accepted	2.76	Accepted
6. insufficient funding of digital skills training programmes by stakeholders	2.80	Accepted	2.65	Accepted
7. inadequacy of commitment and over politicization of the few available digital training programmes by stakeholders	2.77	Accepted	2.86	Accepted
8. inadequacy of synergy for coordination and monitoring of digital skill programmes and internships	2.62	Accepted	2.89	Accepted
9. brain drain syndrome, as the truly digitally skilled persons tend to leave for greener pasture in more advanced countries	2.71	Accepted	2.79	Accepted
10. awarding of digital trainings to political affiliates and contractors who have little or no relevant skill to effectively execute programme	2.77	Accepted	2.83	Accepted
Cluster Mean	2.76	Accepted	2.80	Accepted

**DPE is digital professionals and enthusiasts*

Table 1 revealed that the mean ratings of all the individual questionnaire items for both Nigerian and Kenyan respondents is greater than 2.50 (the benchmark for accepting an item). It could also be seen from the table that the cluster mean rating for respondents from Nigeria is 2.76 and that of respondents from Kenya is 2.80, confirming that both are greater than 2.50. This implies that all the research items are accepted as the challenges limiting digital economy from

absorbing most of the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya. It is also understandable from the table that the difference between the cluster mean ratings of 2.80 for Kenya counterparts and 2.76 for Nigerian is 0.04, which is relatively low even though it is in favour of Kenyans.

Research Question 2: What digital skills must the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya acquire to become gainfully employable in the digital economy?

Table 2

Mean rating of digital professionals and enthusiasts on digital skills that must be acquired in order to become gainfully employable in the digital economy.

S/N	Relevant digital skills needed to become employable in the digital economy:	Nigerian DPE (n=500)		Kenyan DPE (n=500)	
		Mean	Remark	Mean	Remark
1.	Cybersecurity and data privacy skills	3.32	Accepted	3.80	Accepted
2.	Digital and social media marketing	2.88	Accepted	2.96	Accepted
3.	Augmented Reality (AR), Virtual Reality (VR) and animations/video editing	2.90	Accepted	2.87	Accepted
4.	Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning	2.84	Accepted	2.96	Accepted
5.	Data Science, Analysis and visualization	2.87	Accepted	2.81	Accepted
6.	User Experience (UX) / User Interface (UI) Design and Internet of Things (IoT)	3.01	Accepted	2.91	Accepted
7.	Blockchain technology skills	2.76	Accepted	2.90	Accepted
8.	Coding/programming and quantum computing	2.89	Accepted	2.92	Accepted
9.	Cloud computing skills and Search Engine Optimization (SEO)	2.66	Accepted	2.78	Accepted
10.	Digital Literacy and Ethics	2.64	Accepted	2.80	Accepted
	Cluster Mean	2.88	Accepted	2.97	Accepted

**DPE is digital professionals and enthusiasts*

From Table 1, it is observed that each mean rating of individual item of the questionnaire for digital professionals and enthusiasts from Nigeria and Kenya is greater than 2.50 being the benchmark for accepting an item of the questionnaire. This implies that all the items are accepted as digital skills that must be acquired in order to become gainfully employable in the digital economy. It is also seen from the table that the cluster mean rating for the Nigerian respondents is 2.88 while the Kenyans' is 2.97, and both are greater than 2.50. Understandably, even though both categories of respondents are in agreement with the items, on average, ratings from Kenyans are slightly higher, gaining 0.09.

5. Discussion of findings

The investigation reported that the challenges limiting digital economy from absorbing most of the unemployed in Nigeria and Kenya are: inadequate digital skills training centers and platforms; inadequate digitally skilled manpower to be employed as trainers and or typical work;

poor and unreliable internet infrastructure; extremely limited access to digital training centers by those in vulnerable and rural localities; high cost and non-affordability of digital skills trainings; insufficient funding of digital skills training programmes by stakeholders; inadequacy of commitment and over politicization of the few available digital training programmes by stakeholders; inadequacy of synergy for coordination and monitoring of digital skill programmes and internships; brain drain syndrome, as the truly digitally skilled persons tend to leave for greener pasture in more advanced countries, and awarding of digital trainings to political affiliates and contractors who have little or no relevant skill to effectively execute programme. The report is in consonance with Ennatu (2023) who lamented that despite new digital skills projects led by the Kenyan government, the private sector and international partners, the digital skills sector receives too little attention and funding, there are not enough professionals with advanced digital skills for its growing digital economy job market, it lacks sufficient high-level digital skills, but there is still relatively low uptake of mobile internet, especially among women. Similarly, Oparaugo (2023) decried the overwhelming digital skills gap that has been linked to the high unemployment rate in Nigeria. In the same vein, Adio-Adepoju (2024) buttressed that mismatched skills, lack of employability skills, lack of work experience, and lackadaisical attitude to internships, volunteering, and apprenticeships hampers of optimization of employment in the digital sector. The similarities in the report is an indication that Nigeria and Kenya are facing similar problems in driving her digital economy for optimized employed. This might be because both countries are still within the bracket of less developed countries with obvious struggles for development.

The study further reported that the digital skills that must be acquired in order to become gainfully employable in the digital economy include: cybersecurity and data privacy skills; digital and social media marketing; augmented reality, virtual reality and animations/video editing; artificial intelligence and machine learning; data science, analysis and visualization; user experience design, user interface design and internet of things; blockchain technology skills; coding/programming and quantum computing; cloud computing skills and search engine optimization, and digital literacy and ethics. In tandem with the report, Orji (2024) identified prominent skill areas that guarantee employment in digital economy to include, but are not limited to: Dev Ops; Internet of Things (IoT); Digital marketing and collaborations; Game development, Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR); Cybersecurity; Artificial intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning; Data Analysis and Visualization; User Interface design (UI), User Experience design (UX) and 3D printing; Blockchain; Quantum/Cloud computing; wireless power, and animation. Similarly, Ubabudu (2023) reported that becoming employable in the digital economy demands empowering people with digital knowledge and skills leading to them becoming content creators on Youtube, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, X, and similar social media; equipping people with digital competences leading to them becoming online facilitators; empowering people with relevant health skills and proficiency leading to them becoming digital health providers; acquainting people with expertise leading to them becoming professional Bloggers; preparing people with digital competences leading to them being gainfully employed by firms in the digital economy; equipping people with all the competences leading to them becoming Freelancers and E-Researchers; enabling people with digital contents leading to them

becoming emerging technology enthusiasts (exploiting the gains in emerging technologies (Artificial Intelligence, Cloud Computing, Internet of Things, Analytics, etc.); empowering people with digital knowledge and skills leading to them becoming Digital Technologists; enabling people with relevant digital competences to take up ventures in E-Commerce and FinTech, and equipping people with agro-digital knowledge and skills leading them into E-agricultural ventures. All these portray relevant aspects of employability in the digital economy that are digital skills driven.

6. Conclusion

Unemployment rate in Nigeria and Kenya is alarming, yet the digital economy has arrived at the right time to contribute to remedying the unwanted situation. From report of the study, challenges limited the optimization of employment in the digital economy in Nigeria and Kenya have been revealed and reconfirmed, including the inadequacy of digital skills training centers and manpower, politicization of digital skill training programme, high cost of running digital training, et cetera. The digital skills that must be acquired in order to become gainfully employable in the digital economy are cybersecurity and data privacy skills; digital and social media marketing; augmented reality, virtual reality and animations/video editing; artificial intelligence and machine learning; data science, analysis and visualization, et cetera. With the findings reported, it is possible to make the digital economy one of the most important sectors of the economy in both Nigeria and Kenya by sincerely addressing the challenges in order to make the most of the identified salable digital skills.

7. Recommendations

Based on findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

1. The Government in Nigeria and Kenya should demonstrate unquestionable commitment to addressing the challenges through sincere and objective public-private partnership. The commitment in the form of policies that support digital skill acquisition in the curriculum; unquestionable funding of all aspects of digital trainings; effective coordination and monitoring of the programme, et cetera. This will ensure that the sector is prioritized and given deserving attention that will curb the challenges, thereby leveraging digital economy for solving unemployment problems in both countries.
2. With the salable digital skills being highlighted, the public-private partnership should come fully into play in ensuring effectively implementation of all the skill set in both countries. Identifying the skills is not enough, rather going all out to ensuring that every citizen and resident in the countries practically acquire digital skills of their choices from the array of skills available will be the icing the on the case. The public-private partnership should be attentive to other possible emerging skills by continuously carrying out researches and communicating findings to the public in order to update the nations' data with newest skills in the sectors. By so doing, the digital skills enthusiasts will not miss out on newest skill sets.

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