Nigerian confraternities and mass cross-border fraud

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Abstract

Nigeria is well-known for its significant problem with criminal actors who commit industrial-scale online fraud and related crimes, predominantly targeting foreign nationals and businesses. However, the structures and characteristics of those involved remain less understood. A key area of debate concerns the degree of organization among these perpetrators and their affiliation with organized crime groups. A specific focus of this debate is the involvement of confraternities, such as Black Axe, originating from Nigerian universities. This paper will seek to offer a deeper assessment of the growing role of confraternities in organised fraud and how they utilise networks of members, often based in Western countries, to perpetrate fraud and launder money. The study argues that while the full extent of their involvement is challenging to ascertain, there is mounting evidence that confraternities play a significant role in cross-border fraud and money laundering operations in Western nations.

Introduction

There is a wealth of evidence illustrating the significant role of some Nigerians in perpetrating frauds such as romance, 419 scams and business email compromise (BEC) frauds against foreign nationals and businesses (Interpol 2020, 2024; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019; Lusthaus et al. 2025). The size of the problem is difficult to assess, but if two types of fraud heavily linked to this region are considered, the scale starts to become apparent. Romance frauds alone (which it must be noted also arise from other countries) victimise hundreds of thousands, if not more, every year. In the USA, there were almost 70,000 reported romance frauds to the Federal Trade Commission with losses of $1.3 billion in 2023 (Fletcher 2023). In England and Wales,

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there were just over 8000 'dating scams' reported to Action Fraud in both 2024 and 2023, and it is important to note that many victims do not report, so these represent a fraction of the actual volume of romance fraud within England and Wales and the USA (Office for National Statistics 2025). BEC fraud is also heavily linked to this region and the FBI estimated over $50 billion in losses from this type of crime globally between 2009 and 2023 (FBI 2023). There is little doubt that many Nigerians are engaged in fraud targeting other countries, but when we seek to try and understand the characteristics of these bad actors, there is a little prior research to glean from (Lusthaus et al. 2025).

Research on the organisation of Nigerian fraudsters and the wider West African region has tended to suggest that those involved in these activities range from lone individuals through to small groups and criminal networks often grouped together by family or specific geographical areas (see Akanle et al. 2016; Apantaku 2021; Aransiola and Asindemade 2011; Cretu-Adatte et al. 2024; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019; Lusthaus et al. 2025; Ojedokun and Ilori 2021; Ojolo and Singh 2023; Tade and Aliyu 2011). Indeed, there is a wider debate over the structure of cyber-criminal groups (largely focused upon economic cybercrime) as to their degree of organisation with most arguing they are not organised along traditional organised hierarchical structures associated with 'the mafia' (Lazarus 2024; Leukfeldt et al. 2017a, 2017b, 2017c, 2017d; Lusthaus et al. 2023).

In the context of Nigeria, confraternities can be defined as secret societies that have developed out of student bodies in universities which were originally to further the interests of the members, but some of which have morphed into criminal organisations (Cohen 2021). Some commentators have identified Nigerian confraternities as involved in a variety of serious organised crimes, including fraud on a significant scale (Ariyo n.d.; Cohen 2023; Interpol 2020). There have also been some media exposures of confraternities, such as Black Axe, illustrating significant criminal involvement and engagement in high-profile cases of fraud and money laundering, among other crimes (BBC News Africa 2021). For example, in 2023, Black Axe was implicated in a €800,000 money-laundering and fraud operation busted in the Republic of Ireland involving a senior member of the confraternity, 'Junior Boboye' (Sunday World 2023).

In this context, this paper seeks to address the following key research question: to what extent are the confraternities involved in fraud in Nigeria and more globally? While it is clear more research is needed, and this article cannot provide a comprehensive answer, it will show that there is evidence that confraternities and similar groups are involved in fraud much more than previously considered. While the study focuses on the Nigerian case, these findings contribute to organized fraud scholarship and policing more generally.

The remainder of this article is structured as follows. The article will begin by exploring the broader canon of literature on cybercriminal networks and subsequently engage with specific literature on the organisational structures of fraudsters active in Nigeria and some of the literature on confraternities. The paper will then describe the methods used for this paper before discussing some of the findings before concluding.

Literature

Cybercriminal networks and organisation

The concept of organized crime has long been debated, with definitions based on two or three individuals working together often seen as inadequate (Leukfeldt et al. 2017d; Lavorgna 2020; Lavorgna and Sergi 2014; Wall 2015). Criminologists have extensively examined how traditional organized crime structures manifest within cybercriminal networks, challenging earlier views of cybercrime as merely an extension of existing criminal behaviours (Grabosky 2001). This examination draws from a wide array of studies. Scholars like Wall (2015), Lazarus (2024) and Lavorgna (2020) question the relevance of conventional legal definitions of organized crime—such as those outlined in Article 1.1 of the European Union Council Framework Decision 2008/841/JHA (Council Framework Decision, 2008) and the Article 2(a) of the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (United Nations 2004), to the fluid and decentralized nature of cybercriminal activities (see Lavorgna and Sergi 2014).

Scholars have responded by shifting the analytic lens from structure to function and motivation. Levi (2008) foregrounds the globalisation of illicit enterprise. He notes that the agility of small, mobile groups or individuals often surpasses the organisational sophistication of traditional mafias. In cyberspace, anonymity, transnational reach, and adaptability are more critical than hierarchy or violence (Lazarus 2024; Romagna and Leukfeldt 2024). As such, the defining organisational issue is not vertical command but relational flexibility. It concerns how actors form, sustain, and dissolve ties in pursuit of profit and evasion of justice.

A growing body of empirical work supports this perspective. Leukfeldt et al. (2017a, 2017b, 2017c) demonstrate that phishing and malware networks often grow through trust-based offline ties and specialist forums. These relationships matter more than formal leadership. Lazarus and Okolorie (2019) add nuance, showing how education and infrastructure, such as universities and spiritualists, shape recruitment and role differentiation within Nigerian fraud networks. These observations are echoed across studies in Europe, West Africa, and Asia (Cretu-Adatte et al. 2024; Lusthaus et al. 2023).

However, not all digital fraud operates in a decentralised fashion. Zeng and Buil-Gil (2023) and Décary-Hétu and Dupont (2012) find that some cybercriminal groups prioritise strong relational bonds. Recurring collaborators form semi-stable cores. Others exploit legitimate employment, such as in banking or logistics, to support illicit goals (Leukfeldt 2014; Wang et al. 2021). Recent reports also identify coercive scam compounds operating under hierarchical control. These cases blur the line between organised crime and forced labour (Franceschini et al. 2023; Lazarus et al. 2025; United Nations 2023). Indeed, cybercriminal organisation is best conceptualised along a spectrum from opportunistic collaborations to entrenched structures. What unites these models is a shared reliance on digital affordances and socio-technical adaptability, rather than strict hierarchy. This reconfiguration poses challenges for enforcement regimes still anchored in older definitions of organised crime.

Structure of fraudsters in Nigeria

While cybercriminal networks are globally diverse, Nigerian actors are predominantly organised in flexible small groups or loosely coordinated networks. These differ from mafia-style hierarchies. Although existing taxonomies of cybercrime distinguish between socioeconomic, psychosocial, and geopolitical dimensions (Ibrahim 2016), our focus, like Hall and Ziemer's (2024) work in Armenia and De Kimpe et al.'s (2020) study in the Netherlands, centres on the socioeconomic organisation of Nigerian digital fraud.

Empirical studies reveal notable internal differentiation among Nigerian scammers. Lazarus and Okolorie (2019), drawing on EFCC testimonies, found that university-educated cybercriminals use that latest digital technologies and collaborate with public figures. These collaborations make detection and prosecution more difficult. In contrast, less-educated actors tend to rely on spiritualist partnerships and basic digital tools. This makes them more visible to enforcement. These distinctions also extend to recruitment patterns. University networks often serve as hubs for enlisting money mules and laundering operatives (Button et al. 2024; Lazarus et al. 2023).

Lusthaus et al. (2023), although only briefly referencing Nigerian cases, observe a wider continuum in cybercrime structures. These range from informal collaborations to enterprise-level networks involving laundering and coordination with UK-based actors (see also Lusthaus et al. 2025). Their research highlights hybrid forms of organisation that blend offline and online strategies. Trust-based forums and encrypted platforms often mediate these. While some offenders operate solo, most engage in collective schemes (Lazarus 2024; Lusthaus et al. 2023). This challenges simplistic notions of either total decentralisation or rigid hierarchy.

Most studies of Nigerian cybercriminals similarly emphasise network-based operations rather than command-and-control models (Akanle et al. 2016; Apantaku 2021; Aransiola and Asindemade 2011; Lazarus et al. 2025; Ojedokun and Ilori 2021; Ojolo and Singh 2023; Tade 2013). Yet research on more structured entities is emerging. For instance, Lazarus (2024) documents the involvement of Nigerian confraternities, most notably the Black Axe, in high-level fraud, particularly Business Email Compromise (BEC) schemes. This study represents the only existing direct testimony-based academic research on Black Axe's cybercrime operations. Contrary to mafia-type rigidity, these groups exhibit significant organisational adaptability (Lazarus 2024). This flexibility enables them to endure and evolve despite sustained cross-border enforcement pressure (Lazarus 2024, 2025).

INTERPOL reports corroborate this view. They identify Black Axe as a key transnational organised crime group engaged in cyber fraud, human trafficking, and drug smuggling. These activities span Africa, North America, and Europe (Interpol, 2020, 2024). This convergence of cybercrime with other illicit markets suggests a fluid, networked model of organisation rather than a strict command structure. Further evidence from Italy links Nigerian confraternities to prostitution and trafficking rings (Becucci 2022; Cohen 2021; Grillone 2019; Sergi 2016). This reinforces the argument that cybercrime in the Nigerian context can, in certain cases, overlap with broader organised crime formations. Indeed, the Nigerian case demonstrates that cyber-fraud networks occupy a structural middle ground. They are more organised than ad hoc collaborations but less centralised than traditional criminal syndicates.

Confraternities in Nigeria

Confraternities in Nigeria originated in the 1960 s and 1970 s at universities, aiming to promote academic excellence, Nigerian culture, and the success of their members during post-colonial challenges. Seen as a threat in the 1970 s, many were banned by the Obasanjo dictatorship (1977–1979), and by the 1980 s some, like Black Axe, were involved in suppressing student dissent against the government (Cohen 2021, 2023; Lazarus 2024). Some of these groups evolved into secretive cults engaging in violence for control of specific areas and a wide range of criminal activities globally.

Given their secretive nature and elaborate initiation ceremonies, it is challenging to determine objective facts about these groups (Cohen 2023). Cohen (2022, 1) observes: "My observations and interviews show that there is a significant gap between what the confraternities say they are, crime syndicates or pan-Africanist self-help organizations—and what they actually are".

The literature provides limited and sometimes thin information on confraternities. However, evidence shows some involvement in violence, political mobilization, and cross-border criminal activities such as people trafficking, drug smuggling, prostitution, counterfeit trade, extortion, cybercrime, fraud, and money laundering (Becucci 2022; Cohen 2021; Cohen 2023; Grillone 2019; Meyers 2018; Sergi 2016). Due to these concerns, campus 'cults' were banned by the Nigerian Government in 1990 (Cohen 2021). Figure 1 illustrates some notable confraternities implicated in criminal activities, highlighting the difficulty in obtaining accurate information on their size and scope.

Name of confraternity	Brief description
Black Axe aka Neo-Black Movement of Africa	Black Axe is the most high profile confraternity originating from the University of Benin in the 1970s. It has been linked to the Neo Black Movement (NBM) (who deny the link) and implicated in a wide range of criminal activities globally including: people trafficking, prostitution, cybercrime/fraud and money laundering. Estimates of 3 million members of NBM globally have been suggested (BBC News, 2021).
The Buccaneers	The Buccaneers are a group originating from the University of Ibadan who have been implicated in people trafficking and prostitution, but there is very little data on this organisation in the public domain.
Klansmen Confraternity aka Eternal Fraternal Order of Legion Consortium	Founded at University of Calabar there is limited data available as to whether involved in criminal activities.
Mafia Confraternity aka The Family confraternity	Limited data available as to whether involved in criminal activities.

Fig. 1 Significant Confraternities in Nigeria. Sources: AFRUCA (2021); Ariyo (n.d.); BBC News (2021); Di Liddo et al. (2019); Ecoi.net (2016), Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada (2016); Human Rights Watch (n.d.); National Association of Sea Dogs (n.d.), PM News (2019); Williams (2024)

The Maphites aka Green Circuit Association	The Maphite confraternity was founded in the 1970s at the University Benin and has been implicated in drugs, people trafficking, prostitution and money laundering, particularly in Italy. There is little data about this organisation in the public domain. There are estimated to be 5000 in Italy alone (Ariyo, n.d.).
National Association of Sea Dogs aka The Pyrates	One of the oldest confraternities which has a public website detailing many legal and noble activities (National Association of Sea Dogs, n.d.). No data available as to whether involved in criminal activities.
Supreme Eiye aka Air Lords	Supreme Eiye was founded in the 1960s or 1970s originating from University of Ibadan. Founded as a traditional confraternity it has evolved into a criminal group engaged in a wide range of criminal activities in Nigeria and globally such as people trafficking, prostitution, drugs, identity fraud, counterfeiting and money laundering. Estimates of 'hundreds' probably 'thousands' of members globally (Ariyo, n.d.; Ecoi.net, 2016).
The Vikings aka Supreme Vikings	The Vikings originated from the University of Port Harcourt during the 1980s and has been implicated in violence. Associated with the Vikings is an off campus off shoot called the Icelanders providing a 'street wing' of greater numerical strength, among others. There is little data about this organisation in the public domain.

Fig. 1 (continued)

Ariyo (n.d.) estimated that there were 25,000 confraternity members in Italy alone. In Nigeria, Ariyo estimated that in the 50+ universities in the Southern part of Nigeria, there could be 30,000 members in each university at any one time. Ariyo noted the scale: "As cult or confraternity membership is permanent and for life, then it is possible that there are close to tens of millions of members of these confraternities in different sectors across Nigeria and other countries, including Europe." This extensive network highlights these groups' pervasive influence and reach, both domestically and internationally. These estimates lack detail on how they were calculated but do at illustrate large numbers involved in confraternities.

Methods

The data for this paper was drawn from a wider project to investigate cross-border fraudsters active in Nigeria, Ghana and India. The research was ultimately commissioned by the UK Home Office and the researchers were contracted via a prime-contractor for the UK Home Office to conduct this research. 44 interviews were undertaken with a variety of stakeholders from law enforcement in those countries and the UK, scamfighters, consultants, NGOs and active fraudsters. Only those interviews relating to Nigeria and confraternities have been utilised for this project and many interviewees even from Nigeria knew little about confraternities and their involvement in fraud and cybercrime, which is indicative of the lack of knowledge.

In terms of the wider project and this paper the following research questions were identified:

- What is if any the role of confraternities in conducting cross-border fraud and related activities?
- If they do have a role what type of activities are they involved in and what is the extent of them?
- What structures do confraternities use to undertaken these activities?

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and anonymised and all were conducted in accordance with university ethical procedures supervised by the contractor company's compliance systems.

Before some of the findings are explored it is important to note when considering the quotes from the interviews the following key issues. First, the interviews with UK law enforcement and government officials were premised by first what is your security clearance and then are you going to publish the findings? As a consequence there were multiple questions where these officials revealed they were unable or unwilling to answer, including questions related to this paper. Second, law enforcement and officials based beyond the UK were generally much more willing to talk, but some, particularly based in Nigeria, operated in narrow areas and their experience of confraternities varied. Some spoke with direct experience, others more of a general understanding drawn from others in this area. Also, some investigators focus on the prosecution of a case and are preoccupied with the facts related to that and not the bigger picture, others were specifically tasked to look for the bigger picture. The former may therefore have had much less experience of confraternities as this would not have been a priority in the investigation. There were multiple contradictory statements as a consequence, some of which will be illustrated later. These differences ultimately reflect a lack of data on confraternities, the particular security constraints of some actors revealing such information and habitus of operation of interviewees: some looking at the bigger picture, others focused on a narrow area which may or may not have uncovered confraternity links. Together - as we will note again later - they illustrate the need for more research in this area.

Findings

This section will now reveal some of the findings from the interviews conducted. First, the scale of the potential involvement of confraternities in fraud, cybercrime, and money laundering will be considered. These interviewees, either through private entities or law enforcement, gathered evidence on the confraternities, which enabled them to make informed insights.

Scale of confraternities' engagement in fraud

Truly understanding the scale of confraternity involvement is very difficult to determine to a high degree of accuracy. Not least these are secretive organisations where

members do not openly declare their allegiance. Therefore, even for law enforcement investigating suspects it is often difficult to determine what their memberships are, unless they admit to it or if there is other compelling evidence. Linked to this, many investigators focus on the specific case and the evidence for building a successful prosecution and therefore do not look for wider linkages and networks.

It also important to note that some Western law enforcement agencies do not prioritise cross-border investigations because of the challenges and some therefore have only an experience of relatively few cases (Cross 2020). Nevertheless, some interviewees based upon their experience of investigating frauds were able to offer some insights. A law enforcement officer from a third country, based in South Africa and involved in investigating money laundering by organized crime groups, illustrated the global reach of confraternities, particularly Black Axe, and highlighted their significant role in fraud:

> "I'm talking (to) law enforcement from Germany, from France, from Italy, right through... Venezuela, Argentina. I'm seeing Canada. I'm seeing all over the UK. We're working with Japan. We're working with Australia, and from what I can see and from what we are exchanging on a weekly, monthly, yearly basis is that this is not being conducted by individuals. The only thing that we see actually being conducted by individuals is (extortion) as videos currently being referred to. And this is, this is all the hype these days is extortion" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

He further noted:

> "From what we are seeing is that the majority of those scams and BEC frauds are being conducted by Nigerian-based confraternities, like Black Axe, like the A Lords, and like The Buccaneers" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

A scam-fighter working to understand such groups also argued:

> "What's driving this (rise in fraud) right? And certainly when I did my research. you know, West African Organized Crime groups…"(Scam fighter 3).

An anti-fraud consultant noted that these groups had some elements of the mafia but lacked the same infrastructure:

> "There are gangs that are like the Mafia. I don't think Black Axe... they do some of it, i.e., the intimidation, that people won't give evidence against them. They're good at what they do, you know, they do a lot of business email compromise. They're very, very good at hacking, phishing. Also very good at persuading people, the social engineering side, if phone calls are required. So they do all that. I think where they are perhaps lacking, is... well, this is something that was told to me, is they lack infrastructure, in the same way that the Mafia do" (Anti-fraud Consultant).

Another scamfighter emphasized the institutionalized role of Black Axe:

> "It's even institutionalized. And of course, that's also where groups like Black Axe and A Lords. And all these guys, they actually come in and that is where you get the most serious... of the West African side, Black Axe are ruthless... they're renowned for things like human trafficking and everything" (Scam fighter 1a).

The scale and innovation of their money laundering activities were highlighted through their work in South Africa alone:

> "We now know, just between 2017 and 2022, just Cape Town, one sub zone of Black Axe laundered 220 million US Dollars through South African banks. That's it. We haven't even touched the crypto. We haven't even touched the... I mean, these guys live large, the G-wagon, the luxury goods, the yacht..." (Scam fighter 3).

He continued:

> "Apart from being highly structured, they understand how money moves as well as crypto trading. They're pioneering new models of moving money globally at this point in time" (Scam fighter 3).

Similarly, an Irish law enforcement officer pointed to the scale of money laundering in Germany alone by Black Axe, noting:

> "So I was saying like we can show, they (Black Axe) have laundered about 80 million (Euros) here in the last 3 or 4 years. So I was just saying, well, Germany is 15 to 20 times the size of Ireland. So if you just extrapolate it out, you have a problem" (Irish Law Enforcement).

Some active and former scammers were among the sample. One referred to working with an HK and the need to pay but did not confirm if it was a confraternity or another group:

> "Once…you to go and work for HK, they charge. If you don't pay, as far as I know, [fuck all] you understand. Because once you go pay money, they're now giving you, sending you work. The fee for HK now…".

He elaborated:

> "They also get personal people who do it on their own. Because if you go HK to… you get the trend online, nobody explains you, but you go HK, but they give you what to do comprehensively" (Scammer 3).

Whether a confraternity or organized group, this reveals more organized structures active in organizing fraud in Nigeria. However, there was no consensus on the dominance of confraternities. A UK law enforcement officer was more open-minded, but also constrained by what he could reveal due to security classifications related to this area:

> "Yeah, it depends who you talk to, doesn't it, really, about Black Axe? I think they're more of a kind of... in Europe; I think they are less controversial than they are in the UK. I think the UK is slowly getting its head around what something like Black Axe might be, and what it might not be. Certainly, if you talk to the Italians, they constitute it as a Mafia organization, along with other confraternities. If you talk to the Nigerians about it, then they may not be quite in the same space. So it really does depend – they are such shadowy organizations. People have a range of opinions of them. But yeah, maybe Black Axe and those kinds of organizations are involved" (UK Law Enforcement).

One scam fighter interviewed, who spends significant time disrupting fraudsters in Nigeria, considered the confraternity involvement to be hyped by the media. Although it must be noted much of his work related to taking down scam websites and not depth investigations for the purposes of legal action, but he did note:

> "So, there's two things there. In the media, it makes a much better story if you have the Black Axe Gang who are using Juju, using Black Magic, you know, this sounds terrible, and terrible things sell a lot of newspapers, get a lot of clicks. My opinion on media portrayals and something like The Black Axe Gang, I don't believe that The Black Axe Gang has existed in a long time, except for again, these three kids, now I'll use them as an example continuously here. They can go, oh, we're going to call ourselves The Black Axe Gang, and they get bigger and bigger and bigger. Why are they calling themselves The Black Axe Gang? Because of the historic Black Axe Gang, and then you end up with something like that where if they become really successful like they were in Ireland" (Scamfighter 4).

In response, a law enforcement officer felt that some law enforcement had not done enough to understand the deeper connections linked to those West Africans involved in fraud, giving an example from Switzerland:

> "And there was an article in one of the newspapers that came back about 2, 3 years ago about the Black Axe, and how prevalent they were in Switzerland and the police chiefs for… But the government saying, well, what do you know about this?"

Further investigations revealed:

> "Oh, actually, these NGOs are right. Actually, their Black Axe is extremely powerful in (Switzerland) very prevalent, like the head of the Black Axe for all

of Europe is based in Switzerland. You know, and the police didn't know this until this article was done by NGOs and investigation were done by them and journalists" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

Switzerland as a financial hub with banking secrecy provides opportunities for money laundering, which is one of the key activities undertaken by Black Axe. Indeed, historically Switzerland has been one of the most popular countries to place proceeds of crime for Nigerians (Otusanya and Adeyeye 2022). The interviews suggested that Black Axe was the most dominant in fraud, although other confraternities were involved too:

"Let's say Black Axe is probably the biggest compared to the other ones, but I would say the second biggest will be the Air Lords and the third biggest will be The Buccaneers. The reason why I say that is that when we start initially venturing into this Black Axe featured all the time. And then it became media articles, and people start catching onto it. And it became a buzzword. And now everything that's coming from Nigeria that's fraud is Black Axe. But that was a mistake. I mean, you can't. You have to confirm through evidence that the person actually belongs to a certain confraternity. We found the Blackberries, we found videos, for example, on the seized mobile phones where they might assign off the A Lords" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

Evidence of involvement

The last quote raises an interesting question about what evidence is driving those who consider confraternities to be playing a crucial role in these criminal enterprises. Seized phones and other paraphernalia were key to these assessments, including commonly used templates in multiple countries:

"So that's common across phones almost identical across probably 40, 50 phones that we have seized and examined. Interestingly, I met the Belgium police as well. I spoke to him about the Black Axe, and they were investigating them in relation to prostitution and trafficking. The same template on the phones in Belgium as we are having here."

He continued:

"What does happen is that when somebody agrees to be a money mule, this template is sent to them to fill it in with their name, data, bank address, bank account number... And this ended, it's usually Snapchat, is a screenshot of it taken and it's sent back" (Irish Law Enforcement).

The seized evidence also spoke of percentages:

"There is a lot of talk on the phones of share of percentages who gets what and different people" (Irish Law Enforcement).

The same law enforcement officer pointed to the hierarchical structure uncovered from the seized evidence of a leader termed the chair operating from beyond Ireland:

"So Chairman is the boss, is the like the chair of the board, the Chairman of the board. So we have one person alright, and knock that out. One person in Ireland who has been referred to as the chair a majority. The chair is outside of Ireland and primarily in Nigeria. We have phone recorded phone calls, there were recorded WhatsApp messages, voice messages on the laptop where this guy is talking to somebody advising what we should do, we should be on the case. He keeps going. And then this phone type of morning share. How are you? Clear Chair, Mr. Chairman, wouldn't like this. You know these types of terminologies" (Irish Law Enforcement).

Another suspect arrested had evidence of the Supreme Eiye confraternity on a memory stick:

"...he had a memory stick on him and on the memory stick, there were references to the Supreme Eiye fraternity and kind of rules and regulations. It's some kind of, it's hard to make sense of it. But he was at a Black Axe meeting in Germany, and he's collated with people. When I say collated, he was stopped in the car here with another guy who portrays himself as a representative of the Neo Black Movement, which is, as you know, another name for the Black Axe. So whether he is Black Axe and he just has this memory stick, or whether he's Supreme Eiye confraternity, and they're just operating with each other, we don't know" (Irish Law Enforcement).

A law enforcement officer based in South Africa, in building a case for extradition, found extensive evidence of organizational structures linked to confraternities behind the scenes:

"...from those 162 electronic devices we started seeing the telecommunication, social as well as financial links to all the confraternities or zones as we referred to it in other countries. When I mentioned on the social level, we're seeing it with the yearly conferences where they're flying from their different zones to different countries. For example, the Black Axe Europe Conference was actually held in Berlin, Germany, a few years back, and when it was held in Cape Town you will see confraternity members flying in from all over Europe, as well as Canada, as well as the US. And then they, of course, attend a conference for a whole week" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

Another illustration of the reach of the confraternities is where personnel are directed to areas to organize or improve efficiencies. One case in Ireland illustrated this with a Nigerian being investigated who also had wider connections in Nigeria:

"He came here in 2018 as an asylum seeker. The intelligence is that he was sent here to basically up the ante. There wasn't enough money coming out of Ireland, and he was sent here to up the ante. So his sister is the political advisor to a governor in one of the states in Nigeria. So that's his political connections and his father is very closely connected with politics, called the Chief. He's here pretending to be a penniless, poor Nigerian!" (Irish Law Enforcement).

There was also evidence of support offered to those apprehended in court and how the evidence in those cases, which is disclosed, is used to improve the group's resilience to law enforcement:

"And I find that those members actually drop up at court, that they through, I presume in theory, that they use membership fees to pay for bail and to pay for defense lawyers. But I do also find that we use certain tactics to investigate these crimes, and to find and arrest our suspects, and a few months down the line because we were divulging those methodologies being used, investigative techniques being used in a court of law. They, of course, then listen to that, make notes, and then they circulate that information to other members, to warn them not to do the same mistake, and they don't then circulate it just within the zone, which is the equivalent of one country. They push it through all the opportunities in all the countries" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

The sheer scale of the money laundering led some to speculate only a highly organized structure such as confraternities could facilitate this:

"But if you start looking at the large losses that we are looking at in the billions of dollars from our actual statistics and that specifically speaks to BEC fraud, romance scams, and investment scams. There is no way that an individual can operate by themselves and launder those types of money on a global level. You need people in other countries to open up bank accounts. You need it. It is a group effort" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

Organizational structure

Several interviews noted the sophisticated organizational structures of the confraternities, which has already been noted by Cohen (2023). A clear organizational structure, regional zones, defined roles, written set of rules, dispute resolution systems, and enforcement structures were all highlighted:

"So you have an exco structure which your CEO and your chief financial officer might sit in" (Scamfighter 3).

"I think we documented over 50 different roles and responsibilities. So this is just an example of it, like the council of Elders. It's an executive group. This is ultimately where you would land up, you know, as you move through an organi-

zation. They provide executive oversight for the organized Crime group senior leadership, this one specifically to Black Axe" (Scamfighter 3).

"And we've actually been able to identify, for example, Black Axe in 38 countries with members in 38 countries, working in tandem with each other to launder proceeds of crime, and assist each other anywhere from obtaining visas to those countries, to laundering proceeds of crime, to exchanging techniques, and then, of course, also arranging the yearly conferences in the different zones to get together in person" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

"So Nigeria is, is headquarters, of course. South Africa is the second biggest zone on the African continent. For these confraternity members. They like it here because of the infrastructure, because things basically work compared to other African countries. Because of housing, because of Internet speeds" (Law Enforcement Based in South Africa).

"They have the world kind of divided into zones. So Europe, they divided Europe into a northern and southern zone recently. So there's different zones. So Ireland is part of the UK zone" (Irish Law Enforcement).

The detailed rules in the governing documents also provide for dispute resolution structures:

"Responsibilities for the infighting, how disputes are resolved. Everything is documented" (Scamfighter 3).

There was also evidence of the reach of the organization via corruption to achieve its aims well beyond Nigeria:

"The Nigerian groups like Black Axe, they've bought into the court system. They have judges on their payrolls. They have law enforcement on their payroll. So the group we work with our vetted folks globally. We wouldn't work with any local law enforcement because of the trust issues. And we've seen this. I mean, I'm not just talking South Africa if they own judges in America, politicians in America, law enforcement, etc. And we can see it when we arrest them and we go to court" (Scamfighter 3).

This findings section has illustrated from some very well-informed sources that confraternities play a significant role in money laundering that there is evidence of involvement in fraud and cybercrime, too, which builds upon an already strong base of literature and evidence linking confraternities such as Black Axe to other criminal activities such as people smuggling, prostitution, illegal narcotics, especially in Italy (Cohen 2021; Cohen 2023; Sergi 2016). The evidence provided, however, probably leads to even more questions than answers, which will be explored in the following section.

Discussion of key themes

The dynamic and evolving cybercrime landscape presents unique challenges and opportunities for criminological study. This discussion investigates cybercriminal networks' structures and operational mechanisms with a particular focus on the Black Axe confraternity. Our investigation sheds light on the multifaceted nature of these networks, emphasizing their adaptability, technological prowess, and global reach. By situating our findings within the broader discourse on cybercriminal networks, our article aims to bridge gaps in existing research and offer new insights into the complex interplay between technology, social dynamics, and criminal activities. The themes explored here draw on empirical data and align with recent scholarly efforts to decode the sophisticated world of cybercriminal enterprises (cf. Lazarus 2024; Lusthaus et al. 2023; Lazarus et al. 2025). This discussion corroborates earlier studies and introduces novel perspectives on the non-traditional structures and strategies that define modern cybercrime (e.g., Lazarus 2024; Lusthaus et al. 2023; Lazarus et al. 2025; Leukfeldt et al. 2017a, 2017b). Through this analysis, we contribute to a deeper understanding of how cybercriminals operate within and beyond the confines of traditional law enforcement paradigms and international borders.

Cybercrime headquarters ("H")

In cybercriminal networks like the Black Axe confraternity, "HK" stands for "Headquarters" or "High Kingdom," terms used interchangeably with nuanced differences. HK is recognized as a central command center that facilitates a flexible hierarchical structure for training new members, functioning akin to an online fraud academy. This structure is pivotal during the training phase but tends to dissolve after members graduate. HK is conceptually broader than a physical location, acting as a theoretical point of reference within the network and often materializing as a facility managed by an "HK Chairman." Here, novices learn various fraud techniques and job-seeking strategies from globally contributed insights (e.g., Lazarus 2024). Thus, HK serves primarily as a conceptual space for spreading knowledge and tactics across the network, and has gained traction in street-level parlance, indicating its acceptance and utilization beyond the confines of organized cyber fraud. HK functions similarly to a school, emphasizing educational and strategic aspects over territorial concerns. This dual functionality underscores the decentralized and adaptable nature of such organizations, supporting non-traditional, flexible operational structures noted by scholars like Lazarus (2024) and Lusthaus et al. (2023) and further explored by Lavorgna (2020) and Levi (2008).

Organizational structure and adaptability

The structural frameworks of Nigerian confraternities like the Black Axe mark a significant departure from conventional hierarchies, opting for a decentralization and flexibility model that accommodates rapid adaptation across varied geographic terrains. This fluidity reflects a wider trend within cybercriminal networks, which generally discard rigid, formalized hierarchies in favour of more dynamic, responsive

organizational forms. Such flexibility not only enables quick scalability of operations but also bolsters resilience against law enforcement interventions and market fluctuations, supporting a broader shift in the global landscape of crime that demands adaptive strategies in law enforcement and regulatory frameworks (Lazarus 2024; Leukfeldt et al. 2017a). This adaptability underscores the need for innovative law enforcement strategies to effectively combat cybercrime.

Global reach and collaboration

The extensive reach of cybercriminal networks is exemplified by the operations of Nigerian confraternities, affecting regions as diverse as Germany, Italy, Canada, and the USA. This extensive reach underscores the transnational nature of modern cybercrime, with criminals exploiting both local and global connections to execute complex schemes across borders. Such international operations pose significant jurisdictional and legal challenges and demonstrate the sophisticated coordination existing among different network nodes (Cohen 2023; Interpol 2020; 2024; Lazarus 2024). A thorough understanding of this global dimension is crucial for devising effective international law enforcement strategies to tackle the increasingly fluid and interconnected nature of cybercrime.

Role of technology and social ties

Technology and social relationships are pivotal to the operational success of cybercriminal groups. In networks such as those managed by the Black Axe, there is a distinct stratification based on educational background and technological proficiency. More educated members often collaborate with public figures and employ advanced technologies to commit crimes, presenting sophisticated challenges to existing legal frameworks. This reliance on advanced technology underscores the need for technological advancements in law enforcement to effectively combat cybercrime. Conversely, less educated members might depend more heavily on traditional social networks and simpler technological tools, demonstrating the diverse operational tactics within the network. This variability in technology use and social connectivity not only augments the networks' adaptability and resilience but also exemplifies the complex interplay between technology and human relationships within these criminal enterprises (cf. Lusthaus et al. 2023; Leukfeldt et al. 2017a, 2017b; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019).

Money laundering and confraternity involvement

Additionally, this paper has underscored the substantial involvement of confraternities like Black Axe in money laundering activities on a global scale, primarily funded through the proceeds of fraud and cybercrime. Notably, the FBI estimates that BEC fraud alone has amounted to approximately $50 billion globally from 2013 to 2022 (FBI 2023). Although Nigerian actors are not the sole perpetrators, their significant contribution to these losses illustrates a critical need for effective money laundering controls developed with specific reference to the methods of iNigerian bad actors

(e.g., Hock et al. 2024). This necessity is accentuated by the sophisticated methods employed by confraternities, leveraging their networks of professionally placed members worldwide to facilitate these activities. This dual structure of confraternities as both direct actors and facilitators of crime highlights the complex, layered nature of organized cybercrime in Nigeria. The interplay between smaller, independent actors and more structured confraternities creates a dynamic environment where fraud and money laundering are not just activities but are embedded within broader organizational practices (e.g., Yagboyaju and Akinola 2019). The significant sums of money derived from cybercrime necessitate a nuanced understanding of the structures supporting such enterprises. Confraternities provide a framework within which fraud is not only committed but also the proceeds laundered, showcasing their pivotal role in the cybercrime ecosystem. This complex system of relationships and activities challenges traditional views of criminal organizations and requires law enforcement and researchers to adopt innovative strategies for combating these crimes effectively. Understanding the "nature of the beast" they face is crucial for law enforcement and policymakers as they develop targeted strategies to dismantle these networks and prevent further exploitation and financial loss.

Conclusion

This study has illuminated significant new dimensions regarding the role of confraternities such as the Black Axe in orchestrating fraud, cybercrime, and money laundering, particularly involving Nigerian actors both domestically and internationally. The research presented addresses a notable gap in existing literature, which has historically overlooked the intricate involvement of these groups in such criminal activities. While this paper is very far from definitively describing and accounting for the full extent of confraternity involvement, it illustrates evidence these entities could play a substantial role in the laundering of proceeds derived from fraudulent activities and cybercrime. Additionally, the evidence suggests confraternities' participation in these crimes, although determining the full scope of their involvement remains challenging. Their role appears to be dynamic and fluid, often acting as facilitators who support and enable a complex mixture of individuals, groups, and networks based on situational needs. Consequently, while it is clear that confraternities contribute significantly to these criminal ecosystems, more comprehensive research is imperative to fully elucidate their operations and influence, and the limitations on their influence. Thus, while confraternities are undeniably part of the problem, asserting that they are the central issue without further evidence would be premature. Future investigations are essential to deepen our understanding of these networks and to develop more effective strategies for combating their criminal activities.

SL led the Nigeria part of project, contributed to design, conducted interviews and wrote various sections of article.

BN led the Ghana part of project, contributed to design, conducted interviews and wrote various sections of article.

JS contributed to design, conducted interviews and commented on and edited article.

PG led India part of project, contributed to design and commented on and edited article.

DP contributed to design, conducted interviews and commented and edited article.

Data availability No datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

Declarations

Competing interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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Publisher's note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

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