THE DIGNITY IN LABOUR AND SOCIAL MEDIA INFLUENCER CULTURE: IMPLICATION FOR WORK ETHIC AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPIRATIONS

Fasiku, Gbenga Cornelius PhD
Department of Philosophy,
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba,
cfasiku@gmail.com or gbenga.fc@ksu.edu.ng
Tel:+2348169448844
&
Mohammed, Fatima
Department of philosophy,
Prince Abubakar Audu University, Anyigba,
fatikay017@gmail.com
Tel: +2348072694661

Abstract:

This paper examines the traditional African notion of dignity in labour, which emphasises the value of hard work, skill acquisition, and community contribution, and the emerging culture of social media-driven lifestyles, where financial success is often achieved through minimal physical effort. The traditional African ethos views labour not just as a means of survival but as an avenue for personal growth, social status, and community development. However, the rise of social media influencer culture, characterized by quick fame and the pursuit of high income with minimal labour, challenges these age-long cherished values. This paper therefore examines the implications of this cultural shift on work ethic, social values, and socioeconomic aspirations in contemporary society. The paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of how these conflicting views shape individual behaviours and societal expectations, potentially influencing future trends in work culture.

Keywords: **Dignity inLabour**, **African Values**, **Social Media**, **Work Ethic, Socioeconomic Aspirations.**

Introduction

The notion of dignity in labour has deep roots in traditional African societies, where work is not merely a means of subsistence but an essential part of one's identity and contribution to the community. In many African cultures, labour is considered a source of honor and social status, emphasizing the value of hard work, perseverance, and skill development (Okafor 34). The traditional ethos of labour promotes not only economic self-reliance but also communal well-being, as individuals are expected to contribute

their skills and efforts towards the betterment of their families and societies. This approach is intertwined with the values of *Ubuntu*, a philosophy that underscores the interconnectedness of people and the belief that individual fulfillment is achieved through community service and mutual respect (Mnyaka and Motlhabi 215).

However, the rise of social media as a dominant cultural force in contemporary society has led to a shift in perceptions of labor and success. Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have enabled individuals to achieve fame and substantial income through activities that require less traditional forms of physical or skilled labor (Abidin 93). The "influencer culture" prevalent on these platforms often prioritizes lifestyle branding, self-promotion, and content creation over the values associated with traditional work. This trend has sparked debates about the implications for young people, who may be inclined to seek rapid financial success and social validation via social media, rather than through conventional career paths or skill development (Duffy 126). Thus, this paper aims to analyze the tensions between the traditional African conception of dignity in labor and the modern trend of social media-driven income opportunities. It explore how these conflicting views impact the work ethic and socioeconomic aspirations of individuals, particularly in African societies where the cultural transition is more noticeable. Understanding these dynamics is crucial, as the shift in attitudes towards labor and success could significantly influence future workforce behaviours and societal values.

The Dignity of Labour in Traditional African Society

The concept of the dignity of labour in African societies is deeply rooted in cultural, philosophical, and historical values that emphasize the inherent worth of all forms of work. Traditionally, African communities have held a holistic view of labour, where work is not just a means to economic survival, but also a fundamental aspect of human dignity and social responsibility. This notion of labour encompasses a broad range of activities, including farming, craftsmanship, trade, and community service. It is shaped by cultural beliefs that promote communal well-being and social cohesion. As such, in traditional African societies, labour is considered a vital part of life that contributes to the individual's sense of purpose and communal identity. The dignity of labour is closely linked to cultural values such as *ubuntu*, which emphasizes interconnectedness and the belief that "I am because we are". This notion implies that work is not just a personal endeavor, but an activity that benefits the entire community. In this context, labor is regarded as a moral duty that helps maintain social harmony and supports collective welfare. For example, agricultural work, which is pre-dominant in many African societies, is seen not merely as a source of livelihood but as a cultural practice that sustains both the land and the people (Mbiti 45).

The African view of labour also extends to the idea that all forms of work have value,

regardless of their perceived status. In many cultures, menial or manual labour is respected because it is considered essential to the functioning of society. Unlike the hierarchical view of labour often found in Western societies, traditional African societies tend to value the contribution of each individual to the community, whether they are a farmer, artisan, or leader (Wiredu 31). This egalitarian approach to labor underscores the belief that dignity is derived not from the nature of the work itself, but from the effort and commitment one puts into their duties.

The notion of *Omoluabi* in Yoruba culture, also shapes the perception of labor. The term *Omoluabi* refers to a person of good character who exhibits virtues such as hard work, respect, and integrity. In this cultural milieu, labour is not merely a means to an end but a reflection of one's moral character and commitment to societal values (Akinwale 67). This understanding of labour places significant emphasis on personal responsibility and the moral implications of work ethic. The dignity associated with labour is, therefore, not just about the outcome of the work but about the quality of effort and the ethical approach to one's duties. Similarly, other African cultures emphasize the role of labour in upholding social responsibilities and rites of passage. In many societies, young people are often integrated into labour as part of their socialization process, where they learn the skills, values, and cultural norms associated with adulthood (Gyekye 58). Through this lens, labour is seen as an important aspect of personal development and social integration, further underscoring its dignity.

This African perception of the dignity of labor was significantly impacted by colonialism, which introduced new forms of work organization and economic structures that devalued indigenous labor practices. Colonial powers imposed a hierarchy of labor that prioritised certain types of work, such as administrative or clerical jobs, over traditional agricultural or artisanal labour. This shift disrupted pre-existing cultural values that recognised the dignity of all forms of work, leading to a social stratification where certain jobs were seen as more prestigious than others (Rodney, 35). Despite these changes, the traditional African notion of the dignity of labour persisted, often as a form of resistance to colonial devaluation of indigenous labour. Post-independence, many African leaders, including Julius Nyerere and Kwame Nkrumah, emphasised the dignity of manual and communal labour in their visions for national development. They advocated for self-reliance and community-oriented development models that drew upon traditional African values of work (Mazrui 12). This era saw a resurgence of the belief that labour is not only an economic activity but also a moral and social endeavour that contributes to the nation's progress.

In contemporary African societies, the traditional notion of the dignity of labour continues to influence attitudes towards work especially with the growing importance of formal education and white-collar jobs, there seems to be a shifted perception, with some forms of manual labour been seen as less desirable. However, there is still a strong

cultural undercurrent that values hard work and the moral significance of labour, especially in rural communities where traditional practices remain prevalent. Recently also, the African notion of the dignity of labor has also found new expression in social entrepreneurship and community-based initiatives that emphasise social impact alongside economic gains. Many young Africans are now integrating traditional values of communal work and social responsibility into modern business models, thus reaffirming the cultural belief that labour should benefit society as a whole. This approach reflects a blending of traditional and modern values, where the dignity of labour is upheld while adapting to contemporary socioeconomic realities.

Social Media Influencers Culture

The rise of social media influencers has significantly reshaped contemporary notions of labour and success, often presenting a contrast to traditional perspectives, especially within African cultural contexts. Social media influencers (an avenue where individuals leverage their online presence to shape consumer behaviours, lifestyles, and cultural trends) often promote an image of success that is characterised by visibility, material wealth, and digital fame. This portrayal of success through social media has sparked debates on how it aligns or conflicts with traditional values related to hard work, integrity, and community-focused achievements. Analysis of these differences provide insights into the evolving cultural landscape and its implications for work ethic and aspirations.

Social media influencers operate in a digital labour economy that values content creation, personal branding, and online engagement as legitimate forms of work. This culture emphasises visibility and monetization, where followers, likes, and brand partnerships become markers of success. The influencer economy is fueled by an emphasis on "instant success," where rapid fame and financial rewards are perceived as attainable through viral content and lifestyle displays. For many influencers, labour is often invisible, as the behind-the-scenes efforts to create and maintain an online *persona* may not be recognised as traditional forms of work (Duffy 79).

The influencer culture also highlights material wealth and consumerism as symbols of achievement. Many influencers present ostentatious lifestyles that showcase flamboyant luxuries, travel experiences, and beautiful standards, which can promote a perception that success is measured by material possessions. This emphasis on visibility and consumption contrasts with traditional values that view labour not just as a means to acquire wealth, but as a process of personal development, community contribution, and ethical responsibility (Campbell 56). While social media allows influencers to reach large audiences and achieve financial gains through digital platforms, the image of success they promote can overshadow traditional notions of labour rooted in perseverance and delayed gratification.

Traditional Notion of Labor andSuccess

This is in sharp contrast with the traditional African perception and identity where labour is not merely an economic activity but a vital aspect of social identity and moral character. Success is historically and traditionally understood in terms of contributions to family, community, and cultural continuity. Labour is valued for its role in fostering social cohesion and fulfilling moral responsibilities, rather than just the acquisition of material wealth. The proverb "He who does not work, does not eat," prevalent in many African cultures, emphasises the idea that hard work and diligent effort are prerequisites for personal and communal well-being (Gyekye 44).Moreover, success in traditional African societies is often measured by social recognition, respect, and contributions to the community, rather than individualistic pursuits of wealth. People who engage in work that benefits society, such as farming, teaching, or craftsmanship, are respected for their contributions, regardless of their economic status. The emphasis is on virtues such as humility, integrity, and the willingness to labor for the common good. In this view, labour has an intrinsic dignity, and success is seen as the outcome of consistent effort, ethical conduct, and social responsibility (Mbiti 67).

The contrast between the influencer culture and traditional African views on labour presents a generational and cultural shift in the perception of work and success. Social media influencers often achieve prominence through self-promotion, leveraging their personal lives and lifestyles as brands. This approach can conflict with traditional values that prioritize humility and communal achievements over self-centered displays of wealth and status. The influencer culture's focus on instant gratification and materialism may seem to undermine the virtues of patience, perseverance, and ethical labor that are emphasized in traditional perspectives (Wiredu 36).This cultural clash has significant implications for young people who are increasingly exposed to influencer lifestyles as models of success. The glamorisation of quick wealth and digital fame can create unrealistic aspirations, leading some to devalue traditional forms of work or seek shortcuts to prosperity. The tension between these views raises concerns about shifts in work ethic, as younger generations may prioritize visibility and online popularity over hard work, skill development, and community-oriented achievements (Balogun, 98).However, it is also worth noting that some social media influencers embrace traditional values within their digital platforms. For example, influencers who advocate for social causes, share cultural knowledge, or promote local businesses may align with traditional perspectives by using their platforms to benefit the community. These influencers can play a role in bridging the gap between contemporary digital labor and traditional values by integrating ethical principles and social responsibility into their content (Akinwale 54).

It is therefore imperative to reconcile the differences between social media influencer culture and traditional perspectives on labor by recognizing the evolving nature of work

and success in the modern world. While the digital economy and social media provide new opportunities for economic empowerment and self-expression, they also necessitate a critical examination of the values being promoted. It is important to foster a balanced view that respects traditional values of hard work, integrity, and community service while adapting to new forms of labor and success brought about by technological advances.Integrating traditional ethical values with the opportunities presented by digital platforms could help mitigate the potential negative impacts of the influencer culture. For instance, young people could be encouraged to view success not just in terms of personal wealth or fame, but also in terms of the positive impact they create through their work. This perspective emphasises that while digital labour can be a legitimate form of work, it should also embody ethical principles and contribute to societal well-being, much like traditional forms of labor (Thompson 61).

Implications for Work Ethics and Socioeconomic Aspirations

The interplay between contemporary social media influencer culture and traditional African perspectives on labour has significant implications for work ethic and socioeconomic aspirations. As social media platforms increasingly shape perceptions of success and provide new avenues for economic gain, they influence attitudes towards work, self-worth, and material wealth. This shift impacts how individuals, particularly young people, understand labour, success, and socioeconomic mobility, challenging traditional values and potentially reshaping future aspirations.The rise of social media influencers has contributed to a cultural shift that prioritises visibility, fame, and financial rewards as primary indicators of success. Influencers often achieve prominence through content creation and self-promotion, presenting a lifestyle that appears to circumvent traditional pathways of hard work, skill acquisition, and gradual career progression. This portrayal can create the perception that success is attainable without significant effort, patience, or perseverance (Duffy 103).

Traditional African perspectives on work emphasise virtues such as resilience, perseverance and the moral value of hard work, regardless of the nature of the labour. This shift towards instant gratification in social media culture can undermine these virtues, as younger generations might aspire to bypass traditional labour-intensive roles in favor of quicker, more glamorous pathways to wealth and recognition.The growing appeal may also have implications for career choices and the development of professional skills. With the portrayal of digital fame as an easy and lucrative career path, there is a concern that some individuals may neglect traditional professions or skilled labor in favour of pursuing social media fame. This trend can contribute to a decline in interest in professions that require extensive training, education, or apprenticeships, such as engineering, medicine, or craftsmanship (Rodney123). In African societies where there is already a skills gap and high youth unemployment, the prioritization of digital fame over skill acquisition can exacerbate socioeconomic

challenges by reducing the number of individuals entering skilled labor markets.Furthermore, the normalisation of social media as a primary career path may affect professional attitudes toward work ethic. The focus on monetizing personal branding and lifestyle content can encourage a culture of superficiality, where appearances and marketability take precedence over substance and professionalism. This shift could lead to a devaluation of traditional notions of excellence, mastery, and dedication in professional and vocational fields.

The influencer culture can also exacerbate social and economic inequalities by promoting unrealistic aspirations that are not attainable for most people. While social media presents success stories of individuals who achieve fame and wealth seemingly overnight, it often obscures the structural barriers that prevent many from replicating these achievements. For instance, not everyone has access to the same resources, networks, or platforms that enable social media success (Campbell 72). This disparity can create a false perception of social mobility, leading some individuals to overestimate their chances of achieving influencer status and underestimating the value of traditional career paths.Moreover, the emphasis on conspicuous consumption and luxury lifestyles can fuel feelings of inadequacy or failure among those who are unable to attain similar levels of wealth. The constant exposure to idealised lifestyles on social media can distort socioeconomic aspirations by making it seem as though a comfortable or modest lifestyle is insufficient or undesirable. This dynamic can contribute to increased materialism, financial stress, and even unethical behaviours in the pursuit of wealth, such as engaging in fraudulent activities or compromising moral standards (Mbiti 94).

To address the potential negative implications of the influencer culture on work ethic and socioeconomic aspirations, there is a need to integrate traditional values with contemporary digital opportunities. Social media platforms can be leveraged to promote positive values, such as hard work, integrity and community engagement. Influencers who use their platforms to advocate for social causes, share educational content or highlight the importance of skill development can help shift the narrative from instant success to meaningful contributions and sustainable development (Thompson 89).In addition, incorporating traditional African values into educational curricula and social programs can reinforce the importance of work ethic and ethical conduct. By combining the benefits of digital platforms with cultural values that emphasize community well-being and personal development, societies can create a more balanced approach to labour and success. This strategy ensures that the pursuit of new economic opportunities does not come at the cost of abandoning cultural virtues that have long contributed to social resilience and cohesion.

Conclusion

The African notion of the dignity of labor is deeply embedded in cultural values that view workas a moral, social, and economic activity. Rooted in concepts such as *ubuntu* and *Omoluabi*, this understanding of labour emphasises the intrinsic worth of all forms of work, the importance of communal well-being, and the moral character associated with one's work ethic. Although colonialism and modern socioeconomic trends have altered some aspects of these traditional perceptions, the fundamental belief in the dignity of labour continues to shape attitudes towards work in Africa. The enduring relevance of this concept provides a framework for understanding contemporary issues related to work ethic, social values, and socioeconomic aspirations in the continent.

The rise of social media influencers has no doubts transformed contemporary views on labour and success, presenting a departure from traditional African values that emphasize hard work, ethical conduct, and community-focused achievements. While influencer culture often promotes instant success and materialism, it contrasts with traditional notions of labour as a process that fosters personal and communal development. The tension between these perspectives has implications for work ethic and socioeconomic aspirations, particularly among younger generations. Bridging the gap requires acknowledging the value of both traditional and modern approaches to labour, while integrating ethical principles into contemporary digital practices to ensure that the pursuit of success remains aligned with broader societal values.

Works Cited

Abidin, Crystal. *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. Emerald Publishing, 2018.

Akinwale, Anthony. *Omoluabi: The Character of the Yoruba*. Intec, 2013.

Balogun, Olumide. "Influencer Culture and Changing Aspirations: The Case of Young Nigerians." *Journal of African Media Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2, 2020, pp. 95-110.

Campbell, Heidi. *Digital Religion: Understanding Religious Practice in Digital Media*. Routledge, 2012.

Duffy, Brooke Erin. *(Not) Getting Paid to Do What You Love: Gender, Social Media, and Aspirational* Work. Yale University Press, 2017.

Gyekye, Kwame. *African Cultural Values: An Introduction*. Sankofa Publishing Company, 1996.

Mazrui, Ali A. *The African Condition: A Political Diagnosis*. Heinemann, 1980.

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann, 1990.

Mnyaka, Mluleki Michael, and MokgethiMotlhabi. "Ubuntu and Its Socio-Moral Significance." *Black Theology* vol. 3, no. 2, 2005, pp. 215-237.

Nussbaum, Barbara. *Ubuntu: Reflections of a South African on Our Common Humanity*. Random House, 2003.

Okafor, C. U. *African Cultural Values: Igbo Political Leadership in Colonial Nigeria, 1900-1966*. Malthouse Press, 2000.

Rodney, Walter. *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*. Howard University Press, 1981.

Thompson, Evan. *Mind in Life: Biology, Phenomenology, and the Sciences of Mind*. Harvard University Press, 2007.

Wiredu, Kwasi. *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*. Indiana University Press, 1996.