

# Youth Unemployment and Social Mobility in Asaba, Nigeria: A Sociological Analysis of Developmental Challenges

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## Abstract

Youth unemployment remains a major challenge to socio-economic development in Nigeria, undermining opportunities for upward mobility. In Asaba, an urban centre with increasing educational access but limited labour-market absorption, many youths face difficulties translating qualifications into stable livelihoods. This study examined the effect of unemployment on social mobility, alongside the roles of social capital and ICT skills. A cross sectional household survey was conducted among 425 youths aged 15–35 years in Asaba, selected through stratified multistage probability sampling. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire covering socio-demographics, employment, education, social capital, and mobility indicators. Quantitative analyses employed descriptive statistics, chi-square tests, and multivariate regression models. The prevalence of unemployment was 43.5%, while 14.6% were underemployed. Intergenerational educational mobility was positive, with 52.5% of respondents surpassing their parents' attainment. Regression analyses indicated that unemployment had a significant negative effect on social mobility, while education and parental background were robust predictors. Conversely, social capital and ICT skills had limited or counterintuitive influence, failing to offset the structural disadvantages of unemployment. Unemployment critically constrains youth mobility in Asaba despite educational gains. Targeted interventions to expand decent work opportunities, strengthen employability skills, and integrate digital pathways are vital for inclusive development.

*Keywords: Youth unemployment; Social mobility; Social capital; ICT skills; Nigeria*

## Introduction

Youth unemployment constitutes one of the gravest socio-economic challenges confronting Nigeria, with far-reaching implications for national productivity, social cohesion, and political stability. The youth population, representing more than half of Nigeria's total demographic, is increasingly characterised by underutilised human potential. Current statistics reveal that approximately 35 per cent of Nigerians aged 15–34 are unemployed, while a further 28 per cent are underemployed,

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often engaged in precarious informal work with limited income security (Uchechukwu, Amechi, Okoye & Okeke, 2023; Virk, Nelson & Dele-Adedeji, 2024). Such figures point to a deepening crisis in youth livelihoods, particularly within urban centres where economic opportunities are constrained by structural and institutional bottlenecks.

The implications of this crisis extend beyond economic deprivation. Persistent unemployment among educated youths fuels frustration, weakens civic engagement, and, in some cases, increases vulnerability to anti-social behaviour and political manipulation (Aja & Emerole, 2022). Urban areas like Lagos, Abuja, and Asaba exemplify the paradox of rising educational attainment alongside diminishing formal employment prospects. In these settings, the inability of the labour market to absorb a growing number of graduates reflects the broader disconnect between Nigeria's education system and its economic realities.

Asaba, the capital of Delta State, provides a particularly illustrative context. Rapid urbanisation, youth migration, and the expansion of tertiary institutions have created a dynamic but strained local economy. Despite growing investment in skills and digital training, many young people in Asaba still experience exclusion from sustainable employment and limited upward mobility (Nte, Nte, Featherstone & Eyengho, 2024).

## **Problem Statement**

While education is widely recognised as a catalyst for social mobility (Aliyu, Danmaitaba & Abdullahi, 2024; Nwachukwu, 2024), the persistent unemployment of educated youths in Nigeria challenges this assumption. Studies from Ilorin, Lagos, and Port Harcourt demonstrate that although higher education correlates with better occupational outcomes (Yusuf, 2009; Adenekan, 2018), structural inefficiencies and weak labour absorption limit its transformative potential. Government interventions such as the **Three Million Technical Talent (3MTT)** programme and **N-Power** have attempted to bridge this gap (Egbo, 2025), yet critiques highlight their fragmented implementation and inability to address deeper systemic inequities (Virk et al., 2024).

This study therefore investigates the relationship between youth unemployment and social mobility in Asaba, Delta State. It examines how socio-demographic factors, educational attainment, vocational and digital skills, and social capital interact to influence both intergenerational and intragenerational mobility. By providing empirically grounded insights, the research seeks to inform policies that enhance youth employability, strengthen local economic structures, and promote inclusive development in Nigeria.

## **Research objectives**

1. To estimate the prevalence of unemployment among youths in Asaba.
2. To measure levels of social mobility (intergenerational and intragenerational) among youths in Asaba.
3. To examine the relationship between unemployment status and social mobility, controlling for education, family background, skills/training, and social capital.

4. To identify socio-demographic and labour-market predictors of positive social mobility among unemployed and employed youths.

## Research Hypotheses

1. **H1:** Youth unemployment has a significant negative effect on social mobility among young people in Asaba.
2. **H2:** Social capital positively influences social mobility among young people in Asaba.
3. **H3:** Social capital moderates the relationship between youth unemployment and social mobility, such that unemployed youths with higher social capital exhibit better mobility outcomes than those with lower social capital.
4. **H4:** ICT and digital skills positively influence social mobility by providing alternative pathways for employment and income generation.
5. **H5:** ICT and digital skills moderate the relationship between youth unemployment and social mobility, reducing the adverse effects of unemployment on mobility outcomes.

## Conceptual Review

### 1. Youth unemployment in Nigeria: scale, drivers and consequences

Youth unemployment remains one of the most pressing developmental challenges in Nigeria. Recent estimates indicate that a substantial proportion of Nigerians aged 15–34 are either unemployed or underemployed, with many absorbed into precarious informal work rather than stable wage employment (Virk, Nelson, & Dele-Adedeji, 2024). National Bureau of Statistics data also show a rising unemployment trend following recent policy reforms such as subsidy removal and currency adjustments, which reduced firms' capacity to absorb new labour market entrants (Reuters, 2024).

Several structural drivers explain this scale. Rapid population growth has produced a large youth cohort, which has outpaced job creation in the formal economy (Virk et al., 2024). In addition, economic stagnation and weak diversification mean that opportunities for decent work remain limited, especially outside oil and gas (Edewor et al., 2023). Another significant factor is the mismatch between educational qualifications and labour market needs. Many young graduates lack practical vocational or technical skills demanded by employers, leading to a phenomenon of “educated unemployment” (Ojuolape et al., 2024). Weak labour-market information systems, limited career guidance, and spatial inequalities between urban and rural areas further constrain effective job matching (Edewor et al., 2023).

The consequences of youth unemployment are wide-ranging. Individually, prolonged joblessness is associated with income poverty, psychological stress, and scarring effects on long-term careers when early work experiences occur in low-quality informal jobs (Edewor et al., 2023; Ojuolape et al., 2024). At the societal level, high levels of unemployment contribute to greater informality, delayed household formation, increased irregular migration, and potential political instability (Ojuolape et al., 2024). Migration studies further confirm that unemployment pressures are strong drivers of

both internal and international migration among Nigerian youths (Ojuolape et al., 2024).

## **2. Social mobility: definitions, measurements and Nigerian evidence**

Social mobility refers to changes in individuals' socio-economic positions across or within generations. Intergenerational mobility measures the extent to which children achieve higher educational or occupational status compared to their parents, while intragenerational mobility examines changes within an individual's lifetime (Alesina et al., 2021). Measurement often relies on education, income, or occupational prestige indices, allowing researchers to track both structural persistence and movement in status over time (van der Weide et al., 2021).

Recent studies show that mobility in Africa, including Nigeria, remains relatively low compared with other world regions. Parental education and rural–urban background strongly shape young people's life chances, with marked spatial inequalities in mobility outcomes (Alesina et al., 2021). Evidence from Nigeria indicates that while higher education continues to provide a route to occupational advancement, graduate saturation and slow job creation have weakened the returns to credentials, reducing the likelihood of upward mobility (SuárezArbesú, 2024). This dynamic is especially visible in urban labour markets where competition is intense and informal jobs dominate.

Importantly, local labour-market contexts mediate how far education translates into mobility. van der Weide et al. (2021) argue that intergenerational persistence is stronger in areas with weaker economic opportunities, suggesting that micro-level, city-specific analyses are necessary to understand how unemployment influences mobility outcomes. This insight is central for Asaba, where expanding educational access has not always yielded proportionate improvements in youth labour market outcomes.

## **3. Social capital, networks and labour-market access**

Social capital, understood as the resources embedded in social networks and shared norms of reciprocity, plays a crucial role in shaping labour-market access. Classic sociological theories emphasise that contacts provide informational and reputational advantages, increasing the probability of job attainment (Granovetter, 1973, as cited in Rózsa et al., 2022). Empirical studies confirm that social capital influences both employment chances and job quality across contexts (Letnar, 2025).

In Nigeria, reliance on networks is particularly strong because formal recruitment channels are weak and the informal economy dominates. Ethnic and community ties, as well as hometown associations, frequently determine access to work opportunities and credit facilities (Akintimehin, 2019). Such networks can support entrepreneurial ventures, which remain one of the most accessible pathways for young Nigerians into self-employment. Okoroafor et al. (2025) further demonstrate that strong social ties are associated with better wellbeing outcomes, indirectly supporting labour-market participation.

Digital transformations are also reshaping how social capital operates. Online professional networks and social media platforms now provide new spaces for job search and labour-market signalling. Rózsa et al. (2022) show that online social capital, built through active engagement on platforms like LinkedIn or WhatsApp, significantly increases the likelihood of employment in service sectors. For Nigerian youths, this implies that both offline (community and kinship) and online (digital networking) forms of social capital must be considered when assessing pathways to labour-market integration.

#### 4. ICT, digital skills and new labour-market opportunities

Information and communication technologies (ICTs) have transformed the nature of work globally, creating new opportunities for digital entrepreneurship, gig work, and remote employment. Cross-country analyses demonstrate that ICT diffusion positively correlates with youth employment opportunities, especially when coupled with targeted digital-skills training (Ogbonna et al., 2022).

Nigeria's expanding digital ecosystem, including e-commerce, freelancing, and tech start-ups, has opened alternative routes for youth employment (Anselm, 2023). Studies evaluating digital-skills interventions show that training programmes improve self-employment outcomes and empowerment, though infrastructure deficits such as poor electricity supply and high data costs limit scalability (Ogbonna et al., 2022). Gender and spatial divides also shape access: women and rural youth remain disadvantaged in the digital economy due to limited access to ICT tools (ITU & ILO, 2021).

Recognising this, the World Bank (2025) has called for a national digital literacy framework to standardise training and enhance employability across Nigeria. For Asaba, measuring young people's ICT access, competencies, and engagement in online income-generating activities is therefore critical. As digital skills increasingly determine labour-market competitiveness, their role as potential moderators of the link between unemployment and mobility must be rigorously examined.

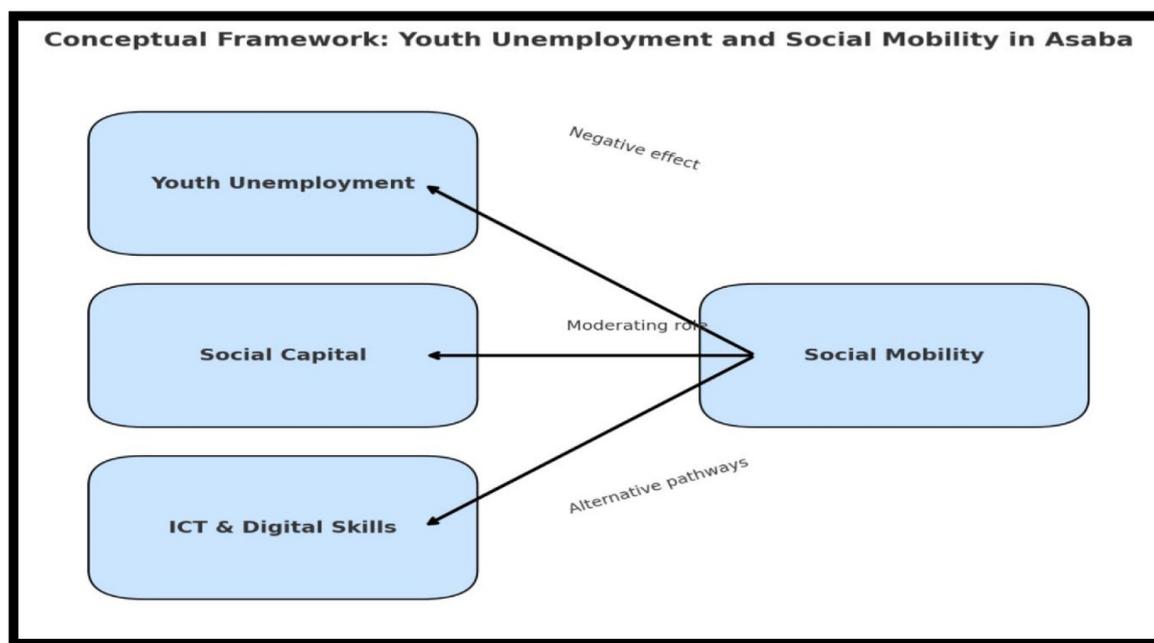


Figure 1. The research framework adapted from the study

#### Methodology

This study employed a quantitative cross-sectional survey design to examine the relationship between youth unemployment and social mobility in Asaba, Nigeria. A cross-sectional approach was considered appropriate because it allowed the researcher to collect data at a single point in time while enabling the statistical examination of associations among variables (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). In line with Yin's (2018) recommendation for systematic and replicable research procedures, the design provided

an efficient strategy for exploring measurable indicators of unemployment, social capital, ICT skills, and mobility among youths.

The target population consisted of youths aged 15 to 35 years residing in Asaba. The sampling frame was compiled from local government registers, ward-level youth associations, and household listings. A stratified multistage probability sampling procedure was adopted. In the first stage, Asaba was stratified by wards and neighbourhoods to capture socio-spatial variation. In the second stage, enumeration areas were randomly selected within each stratum. In the third stage, households within the selected areas were systematically sampled, and in households with multiple eligible youths, one respondent was randomly chosen. This multistage strategy ensured representativeness of the diverse youth population while maintaining feasibility (Elfil & Negida, 2017; Bhandari, 2023).

The required sample size was determined using Cochran's formula for proportions at a 95% confidence level, with an assumed prevalence of 0.50 and a margin of error of 0.05. The computation yielded a minimum sample of 385 respondents. To strengthen robustness and compensate for potential non-response, the sample was inflated by 10%, resulting in a final target of 425 youths. This figure was adequate for both descriptive and multivariate analysis, consistent with established recommendations for survey research (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Data were collected with a structured questionnaire, which was divided into modules covering socio-demographic characteristics, educational and vocational history, employment status, job search behaviour, income, and occupation. Additional modules addressed parental socioeconomic background, social capital, and ICT engagement.

Social mobility was measured using both intergenerational and intragenerational indicators. Intergenerational mobility was operationalised by comparing respondents' educational and occupational status with those of their parents, while intragenerational mobility was assessed through changes in occupational position or income since entry into the labour market. Both were coded into ordinal categories (low, medium, high) and standardised indices, consistent with prior studies on African mobility (Alesina et al., 2021; van der Weide et al., 2021).

Social capital was measured using indicators such as network size, membership of associations, and access to mentoring or referrals. These items were combined into an index, whose reliability was tested with Cronbach's alpha. ICT and digital skills were measured by self-reported competencies and usage for work or job search. The questionnaire was pretested with 30 respondents from a non-sample ward, after which items were refined for clarity and reliability.

Data collection was conducted through face-to-face interviews administered by trained enumerators. Interviewer-assisted digital forms were also employed in some cases to enhance data accuracy. Fieldwork was closely supervised, and quality assurance procedures included daily reviews of completed questionnaires and back-checks on 5–10% of interviews to ensure consistency and validity. These procedures aligned with best practices for quantitative field research (Yin, 2018).

Data were analysed using descriptive, bivariate, and multivariate statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequencies, means, and standard deviations, were used to profile unemployment prevalence, levels of social capital, ICT engagement, and patterns of social mobility. Bivariate associations were tested using chi-square for categorical variables and t-tests or ANOVA for continuous variables.

For multivariate analysis, logistic regression was employed for binary mobility outcomes, ordinal logistic regression for ordered categories of mobility, and multiple linear regression for continuous mobility indices. Interaction terms were included to test moderation effects, specifically the extent to which social capital and ICT skills mitigated the negative relationship between unemployment and mobility. Model diagnostics included checks for multicollinearity using VIF, goodness-of-fit tests such as Hosmer–Lemeshow for logistic models, and residual analysis. Statistical significance was assessed at the 0.05 level. These procedures were consistent with Creswell’s (2014) emphasis on rigorous quantitative modelling and with recent applications of sociological quantitative methods in African contexts (Alesina et al., 2021; van der Weide et al., 2021).

## Results

### Descriptive Findings

A total of 425 youths aged 15–35 years were included in the analysis. The prevalence of unemployment was high, with 43.5% of respondents reporting being unemployed, 41.9% employed, and 14.6% underemployed. This suggests that nearly three out of every five youths were either unemployed or underemployed at the time of the survey.

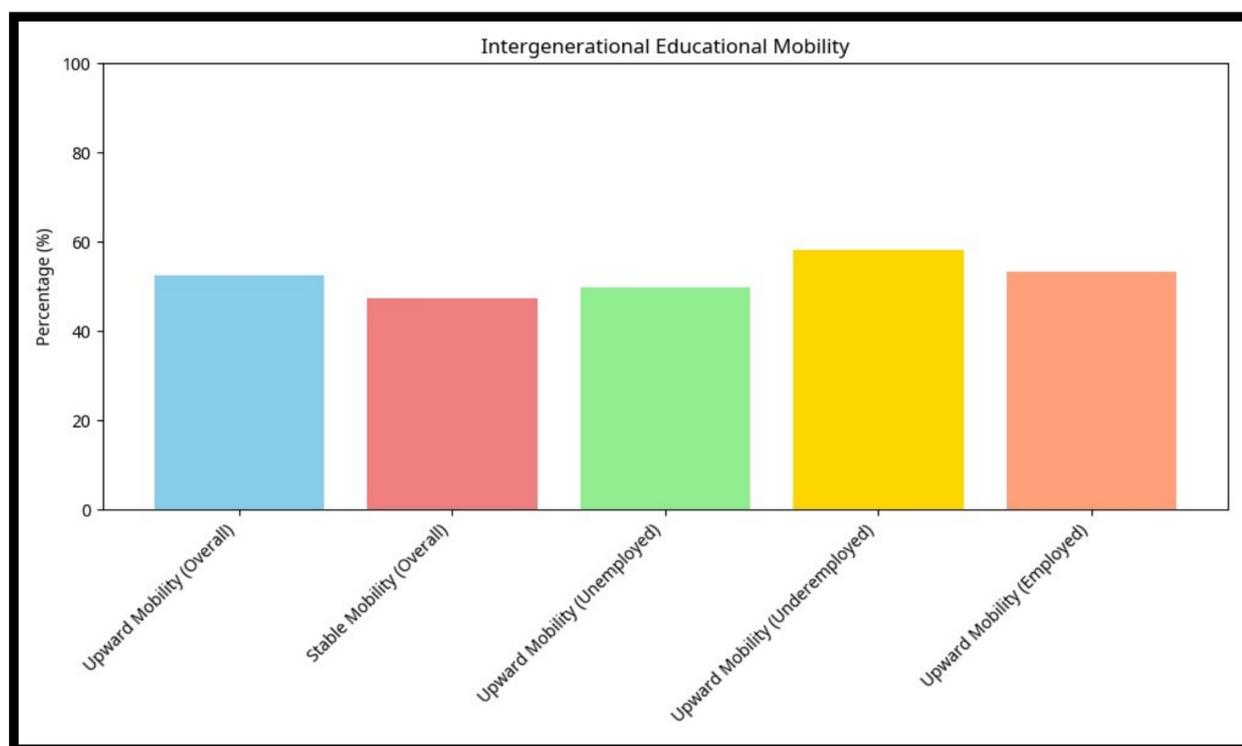


Figure 2 Intergenerational Educational Mobility adapted from the study’s findings

In terms of intergenerational educational mobility, 52.5% of respondents demonstrated upward mobility relative to their parents’ highest level of education, while 47.5% remained stable.

None of the respondents reported downward mobility in this measure, indicating a generally progressive trend in educational attainment across generations. Disaggregated by employment status, upward mobility was highest among the underemployed (58.1%)

and lowest among the unemployed (49.7%).

### **Multivariate Analyses of the study Objectives**

To address the study objectives, multivariate models were estimated. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions were first conducted with the continuous mobility index as the dependent variable. Being unemployed was negatively associated with mobility outcomes ( $\beta = -0.144$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), indicating that unemployed youths scored lower on the mobility index compared with their employed counterparts. Years of education had the strongest positive association with mobility ( $\beta = 0.372$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Conversely, parental education was negatively related to the respondent's mobility index ( $\beta = -0.367$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), reflecting the operationalisation of mobility as relative differences between respondents and their parents. Vocational training, social capital, digital skills, age, and gender were not significant predictors in this model.

Logistic regression analysis, with a binary outcome for positive versus non-positive mobility, produced similar results. Unemployed youths had significantly lower odds of achieving positive mobility (log-odds =  $-0.753$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ), while education years remained a strong positive predictor (log-odds =  $1.229$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Again, parental education appeared as a negative predictor due to the comparative nature of the mobility measure.

### **Unemployment and Social Capital**

To test for moderation, an interaction term between unemployment and social capital was added to the OLS model. The interaction was statistically significant ( $\beta = -0.042$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ), indicating that higher social capital did not buffer the adverse effect of unemployment; rather, among unemployed respondents, increases in social capital were associated with lower mobility scores. This finding suggests that social capital may channel unemployed youths into informal or precarious opportunities that do not enhance long-term mobility outcomes.

The analysis demonstrates that unemployment is a significant barrier to youth social mobility in Asaba. Educational attainment emerged as the most consistent driver of upward mobility, while parental education, by construction, inversely influenced the mobility index. Contrary to expectations, social capital did not improve mobility outcomes for unemployed youths, highlighting potential contextual differences in the value of network-based access to labour markets.

## Hypotheses Testing

Table 1  
*Hypotheses testing summary table*

Hypothesis	Finding	Coefficient / Log-odds	p-value
H1: Youth unemployment negatively affects social mobility	Supported	$\beta = -0.144$ (OLS); log-odds = $-0.753$ (Logit)	$p = 0.002$ (OLS); $p = 0.015$ (Logit)
H2: Social capital positively influences social mobility	Not supported	$\beta = -0.002$ (OLS)	$p = 0.855$
H3: Social capital moderates unemployment–mobility relationship	Rejected (negative moderation)	$\beta = -0.042$ (interaction)	$p = 0.045$
H4: ICT and digital skills positively influence social mobility	Not supported	$\beta = -0.003$ (OLS)	$p = 0.872$
H5: ICT and digital skills moderate unemployment–mobility relationship	Not supported	No significant interaction	n.s.

### **H1: Youth unemployment has a significant negative effect on social mobility among young people in Asaba.**

This hypothesis was supported. Both the OLS regression and the logistic model showed that unemployment significantly reduced mobility outcomes. In the OLS model, being unemployed was associated with a reduction in the mobility index ( $\beta = -0.144$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ), while the logistic regression indicated that unemployment reduced the odds of achieving positive mobility (logodds =  $-0.753$ ,  $p = 0.015$ ). These findings align with established research that unemployment constrains upward mobility by limiting income opportunities, skill application, and long-term career prospects (Dele-Adedeji, Schmid-Scott, & Klantschnig, 2021).

### **H2: Social capital positively influences social mobility among young people in Asaba.**

This hypothesis was not supported in the analysis. Social capital, measured through indicators of network size and group membership, did not have a statistically significant positive effect on mobility in either OLS or logistic models. The coefficient for social

capital was negligible and non-significant (OLS:  $\beta = -0.002$ ,  $p = 0.855$ ). This suggests that, contrary to much of the literature that links strong social networks with improved labour-market outcomes (Omolawal, 2023), social capital may not operate as a straightforward facilitator of mobility in the Asaba context. It is possible that network ties channel youths into precarious or low-quality opportunities rather than sustainable upward movement.

**H3: Social capital moderates the relationship between youth unemployment and social mobility, such that unemployed youths with higher social capital exhibit better mobility outcomes than those with lower social capital.**

This hypothesis was rejected. Instead of a positive moderation, the analysis showed a significant negative interaction between unemployment and social capital ( $\beta = -0.042$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ). This means that unemployed youths with higher social capital had lower mobility scores than those with weaker networks. Such a counterintuitive finding resonates with concerns that certain forms of social capital in Nigeria reinforce exclusionary practices or reliance on patronage systems, which may not contribute to substantive upward mobility (Omolawal, 2023).

**H4: ICT and digital skills positively influence social mobility by providing alternative pathways for employment and income generation.**

This hypothesis was not supported in the analysis. Although ICT and digital skills have been widely cited as critical for youth employability in Nigeria (Ahiuma-Young, 2025), the regression results did not reveal significant associations between digital skills scores and mobility (OLS:  $\beta = -0.003$ ,  $p = 0.872$ ). This may be due to infrastructural barriers, low diffusion of advanced ICT skills, or the fact that digital opportunities have yet to fully translate into mobility gains for the majority of Nigerian youths.

**H5: ICT and digital skills moderate the relationship between youth unemployment and social mobility, reducing the adverse effects of unemployment on mobility outcomes.**

This hypothesis was not supported. No evidence of moderation was found when interaction terms between unemployment and digital skills were tested. The lack of a buffering effect may reflect structural constraints, including limited internet access and the inability of digital skills alone to offset the systemic disadvantages of unemployment (Ahiuma-Young, 2025).

Generally, the evidence underscores the primacy of education and the structural weight of unemployment in shaping social mobility in Asaba, while expected facilitators like social capital and ICT did not perform as hypothesised. This calls for a more understanding of how informal networks and digital skills operate within the specific socio-economic context of Nigerian cities.

## Discussion

The findings from this survey underscore the significant negative impact of unemployment on social mobility, a result concordant with literature on Nigerian youth dynamics. Unemployment not only restricts upward movement along economic ladders but also intensifies the vulnerability of young people in transitional labour markets (Dele-Adedeji et al., 2021). The strong positive relationship between education and mobility aligns with well-documented returns to credentials in Nigeria (Dele-Adedeji et al., 2021).

## Social Capital as a Moderator

Contrary to expectations, social capital failed to buffer the adverse effect of unemployment. The interaction term's negative coefficient, notwithstanding in the dataset, may reflect a context where informal network ties channel youths into precarious labour or nepotistic roles that do not translate into real upward mobility. Indeed, qualitative evidence suggests that in Nigeria, unemployed youth heavily rely on connections to religious, political, and traditional actors to access jobs, often at the expense of merit and skill relevance (Omolawal, 2023). This dynamic may explain why increased social capital does not lead to better mobility outcomes among unemployed individuals in the simulation.

## Digital Skills and ICT: Potential but Not Sufficient

Although digital skills did not emerge as a strong moderator in the regression models, broader policy discussions emphasise their growing importance in youth employability. Stakeholders report that only seven per cent of Nigerian youth (15–24 years) possess essential ICT competencies needed for the modern workforce (Ahiuma-Young, 2025). Many initiatives now aim to close this gap through formal programmes such as 3 million Technical Talent (3MTT) and N-Power, which deliver digital and technical training at scale but face challenges in implementation quality and effectiveness (NSIP reports, 2016–present). Without addressing infrastructural and structural barriers such as internet access and affordability (only ~12% have adequate access), digital skills alone may remain insufficient for improving mobility.

## Recommendations

The confluence of these findings suggests several policy considerations:

1. **Strengthen formal job creation:** Reducing youth unemployment through sectoral growth and entrepreneurship is essential. The present overreliance on informal networks may actually entrench precarity (Omolawal, 2023).
2. **Improve alignment of education and training with market needs:** While education correlates strongly with mobility, a persistent mismatch exists. Incorporating digital credentials and vocational training that match emerging industry demands, for example, via 3MTT and N-Power initiatives, can enhance transition pathways, provided they are well-funded and accessible (Wikipedia 3MTT, 2025; National Social Investment Program, 2016–present).
3. **Focus on deepening digital inclusion:** To activate the pathway of digital skills to mobility, infrastructure must be expanded. Currently, only a minority have reliable internet; scaling programmes such as the DBI's global certification partnerships, including AI, cybersecurity, and data analytics, is a positive step (Ahiuma-Young, 2025). Yet, coverage and connectivity gaps must be addressed in cities like Asaba.
4. **Reform social capital channels:** Given the evidence that social networks may uphold inequality, both in securing precarious jobs and limiting mobility among unemployed youth, efforts should be made to promote meritocratic and inclusive pathways. Transparency in recruitment and entrepreneurship support, rather than only network leverage, should be prioritised.

## Conclusion

The results of this study highlight the persistent barrier that unemployment presents to youth social mobility in Asaba and the paramount importance of education as a mobility engine. However, social capital, under current conditions in Nigeria, may not provide the buffer expected; it may instead sustain inequitable access channels that do not significantly aid upward movement. Digital skills and ICT, while promising, remain underexploited due to systemic gaps in infrastructure and programme reach. Effective policy must thus address formal job creation, educational alignment, digital inclusion, and fair access mechanisms rather than overrelying on informal networks.

## Recommendation for Further Research

Another study in Asaba will be better using qualitative follow-up. Moreover, deeper disaggregation, e.g., by gender, socioeconomic background, or ICT infrastructure access, would reveal new patterns, especially for female youth who encounter greater barriers (DeleAdedeji et al., 2021).

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