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Reviewer: Branislav Hock, PhD, University of Portsmouth

Review of the Doctoral Dissertation

“The Hands of Social Messiness in the Raise of Economic Cybercrime: A Case of Sakawa Phenomenon in Tamale, Ghana”

Doctoral Candidate: Mgr. Abubakari Yushawu

Primary Supervisor: Prof. dr. hab. Mateusz Błaszczuk

Auxiliary Supervisor: Dr. Łukasz Moll

Outcome of the review

The presented work satisfies the requirements placed for the PhD thesis.

More specifically:

1. This doctoral dissertation demonstrates the general theoretical knowledge of the applicant for the award of the doctoral degree in the discipline of sociological sciences;
2. The doctoral thesis demonstrates the ability of the applicant to carry out scientific work independently; and
3. This doctoral dissertation represents an original solution to a scientific problem and an original solution to the application of the results of one's scientific research in the economic and social spheres.

This review presents an expert assessment of the fulfilment of the conditions imposed on the doctoral dissertation in accordance with the Act of 20 July 2018. Law on Higher Education and Science. The review was prepared on the basis of the conditions imposed on doctoral dissertations, and at the same time the characteristics that the dissertation in question should exhibit, are set out in Article 187 of the cited law.

Justification of the Positive Outcome

Economic cybercrime, including its various forms such as online romance fraud and identity theft, is a global problem causing enormous economic and other societal damage. The issue of economic cybercrime has attracted significant scholarly attention. Yet, there are significant knowledge gaps in understanding how specific social processes contribute to the prevalence of economic cybercrime, and especially how regional interpretations of economic cybercrimes matter. The thesis addresses this more general knowledge gap by a multidisciplinary exploration of the case of Sakawa, an illicit online activity that combines technological tactics with cyber spirituality to carry out internet frauds, in Tamale, Ghana. This is a timely and very relevant topic worth researching.

In this context, the thesis aims to examine the proliferation of Sakawa activities in Tamale, Ghana through the lenses of social disorganisation theory. It does so by answering four inter-connected research questions:

- 1. In what ways do the dynamics of social ties, social capital, and social controls contribute to the emergence of economic cybercrimes?*
- 2. How do sociocultural practices and beliefs influence social controls and the development of economic cybercrimes?*
- 3. How can the rise of economic cybercrime be understood in the context of society's collective social control mechanisms?*
- 4. What is the role of economic conditions in the interplay between formal and informal social controls in relation to economic cybercrime?*

By the collection of significant empirical data, including interviews with 5 teachers, 10 police officers, 27 Sakawa actors, and two focus groups with families of Sakawa actors, social media analysis, and the application of the social disorganization theory, the thesis also contributes to our understanding of the social dynamics of Sakawa, which is significantly under-researched.

I strongly value an attempt of the candidate to undertake a significant and original empirical work, and the ability of the candidate to combine this empirical enquiry with a clear theoretical embedding of the thesis. The thesis explains the overall societal problem well and situates itself to two key academic debates, namely a) general knowledge gap of how economic cybercrime is determined by social processes and b) how the prevalence of Sakawa more specifically can be explained by the social disorganisation theory. This provides clear evidence that this doctoral

dissertation represents an original solution to a scientific problem and an original solution to the application of the results of one's scientific research in the economic and social spheres.

I value that the candidate has been able to identify an original research angle (social disorganisation) and apply it to a well-known societal problem (economic cybercrime), collect new data, and interpret those data in a valid way. This has been done with a high level of academic rigour and care, no doubt also thanks to an effective support of the PhD supervisors. The study engages with various social actors from both formal and informal institutions and reveals that in Tamale, economic cybercrimes are predominantly viewed through moral and deviant lenses. This perspective shifts the focus from legal interpretations to moral and sociocultural considerations, indicating a distinct regional interpretation of economic cybercrimes. These are important findings which have allowed the candidate to define unique and workable agenda for future research, useful policy reflections, and produce an important point of reference to others in this field. Parts of this work, for example, has been published in high-quality peer-reviewed journals. These achievements clearly evidence that the doctoral thesis demonstrates the ability of the applicant to carry out scientific work independently.

The thesis is well written, follows a logical structure, and is easy to follow. More than 50 pages long list of references includes the state-of-the-art research, which is referenced in compliance with the subject convention throughout the thesis. Introduction (pp. 15-34) and Chapter 1 (pp. 35-74) provide a well written conceptual background to the thesis and situate the research topic in the broader academic discourse on economic cybercrime. Furthermore, Chapter 2 (pp. 75-95) highlight the theoretical embedding of the thesis – social disorganisation, before research methods and ethical considerations are discussed in Chapter 3 (pp. 96-125). These chapters in combination with a diligent handling of literature clearly demonstrate the general theoretical knowledge of the applicant for the award of the doctoral degree in the discipline of sociological sciences.

The above points justify why the presented work satisfies the requirements placed for the PhD thesis.

Areas of Improvement

In this section, I highlight some areas of improvement of what is already an excellent doctoral dissertation. My comments might be useful for future projects of the candidate and if the candidate decides to publish the dissertation as a scientific book.

Research Problem & Research Design

The thesis explains the overall societal problem well and situates itself to key academic debates. Here, the thesis would benefit from a more specific identification of the academic discourse around economic cybercrime, for instance whether/how the main aim (the proliferation of Sakawa activities in Tamale, Ghana through the lenses of social disorganisation theory) contributes to a more specific discussion on the effectiveness of policing, or for instance, how specifically it can contribute to the development of strategies for improving community cohesion. This remains somehow vague.

The above specificity of academic discourse and knowledge gap would allow the research design to be sharper, and the main aim to be aligned with the four research questions in a more logical way. The inner logic of the four research questions is a little bit vague and it is not immediately clear how individually, and as a sequence of logically linked research steps, they help answering the main aim.

A more specific situating of the research problem would allow for sharper policy recommendations. In light with the social disorganisation theory, the thesis, for example, proposes that policy initiatives should focus on fostering community-building activities and encouraging dialogues that enhance collective efficacy. Such efforts are crucial in overcoming barriers imposed by political and religious differences and promoting a unified approach to solving social problems. Key to this strategy is the implementation of initiatives that enhance collective social problem-solving skills and encourage cooperative efforts across different societal groups. This is useful but given significant empirical work in a specific region, one would expect much more specific set of policy propositions. We know that once people agree what the public good is, collective action is very powerful in delivering that public good, but the key issue is how to overcome a complex set of collective action problems.

As a minor comment, it might be useful to consider some broader research and theoretical work on interdisciplinarity in the economic crime area – see, e.g. Button et al. (2022) *Economic Crime: From Conception to Response*. Routledge, highlighting “economic criminology” framework.

Methods

While it is always great to see empirical work in this area, the multiplicity of methods employed in the thesis creates some risk when it comes to the validity and reliability of empirical data

analysis. The thesis tries too hard to get as much material as possible in many available forms. The combination of a thematic analysis of non-structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, as well as a discourse analysis of social-media conversations features challenges in how to ensure consistency in data analysis, extract objective narrative, and avoid “cherry-picking” of actors and themes. It is not an easy task for the reader to identify how exactly each of the methods contribute to individual research questions and overall reaching of the research aim.

Furthermore, I am somehow confused by the references to “survey data” in section 3.5 – there seems to be no survey undertaken for the purposes of this thesis.

Structure and expression

The main aim of the thesis is at times hidden in the flow of the text and could be better highlighted and cross-refer to throughout the thesis and its individual chapters. This would make some parts of the thesis less wordy and the structure clearer.

The thesis could also be clearer in highlighting the number and types of participants, this is somehow hidden in the flow of the text and not easy to identify. Perhaps more detail in Abstract and Introduction would help, more use of Figures and Tables could help too.

Minor comment on organisation. The main headings could be presented in a more substantive terms, e.g. not only Chapter Three, but highlight this is a methodology chapter.

Ethics

The thesis discusses ethical issues in section 3.7 (pp. 122-125), and makes an effort to explain how key ethical dilemmas related to, for example, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity have been resolved. The nature of this research implies a higher risk of ethical issues. At times, the thesis raises some concerns when, for example, the heading of Section 3.3.1 stands as “The Researcher Chasing the Sakawa Boy”, which might raise some questions about a voluntary participation. I am not fully convinced by the ethics of data collection linked to social media, and how social media conversations can be used as a research material –I consider this to be outside the scope of this assessment.

