

# Exploring how social networking platforms are changing the route of sex trafficking in three South-South States of Nigeria

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## Abstract

The study examined how SNSs are changing the dynamics of sex trafficking in Nigeria. The researchers employed a web based survey design to elicit data from SNSs' users and anti-human trafficking agents in Nigeria. Result revealed that many respondents did not have in-depth knowledge of how traffickers manoeuvre the different SNSs to entice users. Representatives of the anti-trafficking agency indicated that traffickers enticed and groomed their victims through special communication modes such as emojis, etc. Respondents also believed that human trafficking must involve elements of physical force or violence. Findings again revealed that poverty, harsh economic realities, high youth unemployment rate, normalisation of sex and sex trafficking, family pressure, etc. explained why SNSs fall victim of sex trafficking gimmicks. Consequently, the study suggested that tech giants, anti-trafficking organizations, etc. should increase the awareness of online sex trafficking by supporting the implementation of evidenced-based programmes targeted at mitigating the problem.

**Keywords:** Attitude, Social Networking Sites, Sex trafficking and South-South Nigeria

## Introduction

Annually, sex trafficking generates about \$31.6 billion illicit dollars (Grozdanova, 2016); making it the third most profitable international criminal activity in the world (Stapleton et al., 2012). Because of the systematic and furtive nature with which sex trafficking thrives, its burgeoning market value has empowered traffickers and others within the demand and supply chain to begin to incorporate technological innovations in their daily operations. Social networking sites provide unique real time opportunity for people from different part of the globe to connect with others. Social networking platforms have had significant impact on information access and elimination of barriers in communication among people of different backgrounds.

Nonetheless, concerns have lately been directed to the ways in which individuals may become increasingly vulnerable to criminal victimization resulting from their extensive use of SNSs (Majid, 2012). In a study on the use of technology in sex trafficking networks and sexual exploitation in India, Nepal, Thailand, Hungary, and the United Kingdom between 2010 and 2013, Siddhartha (2015) found that traffickers and their networks made good use of sophisticated software in order to safeguard their anonymity, make use of online storage and hosting services, and use advanced encryption techniques to counteract digital forensic investigations by the police. Other studies (e.g., Fraser, 2016; Rhodes, 2017; Sykiotou, 2017) on sex trafficking have also lent credence to the above relationship.

In Nigeria, as in many African countries, sex trafficking has assumed a worrisome dimension. Statistics showed that more than 25,000 Nigerians have been held in slave and sex camps in Libya (Premium Times, 2017). To date, reports of sex trafficking in Nigeria have significantly come from Edo, Delta States and Akwa Ibom, in South-South, Nigeria, with their women tending to wander to European countries, especially Italy, Spain, Belgium, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Germany (e.g., Braimah, 2013; Mancuso, 2013; Osezua, 2016).

While issues of sex trafficking in Nigeria has continued to raise concerns, stakeholders have in part, attributed its current rise to globalization and advancement in social networking technologies. The surge in sex trafficking in Nigeria has partly been attributed to the rapid rise in social networking platforms (Gledhill, 2018). SNSs may therefore be employed in the recruitment, transfer and transportation of victims. Also, manipulation of consent through blackmail, the actual exploitation of the victim and finally, post-exploitation are now perfected by social networking technologies. Furthermore, SNSs aid sex traffickers in avoiding being traced and evading prosecution.

Consequently, the significance of SNSs in the spread of sex trafficking cannot be over emphasized. This is because a large segment of Nigerian youths are active users of social networking platforms such as Facebook and other common sites. It is a fact that, an average Nigerian youth is a Facebook, Twitter or an Instagram “addict”. Although empirical knowledge regarding the phenomenon in Nigeria is limited (compared to other climes), the high number of SNSs users in the country and the potential markets it (the SNSs users in the country) can create for sex trafficking (both locally and internationally) is worthy of investigation.

Although the phenomenon appears to be of general concern in Nigeria, the bulk of the problem is particularly apparent in south-south Nigeria, which is one of the six geo-political zones in Nigeria (Akwa Ibom, Cross River, Bayelsa, Rivers, Delta and Edo states). Of these six states, Edo state has the highest percentage of persons trafficked in sex. As a matter of fact, report has it that more than 90 percent of Nigerian women trafficked into Europe were from Edo State (Pathfinder Justice Initiatives, 2019). Equally, during a five year period (2012-2017), the government made efforts to identify 1,128 potential trafficking victims: 529 sex trafficking victims, 426 child labor victims—some of whom were forced, including 261 children in domestic servitude—and 173 adult forced labor victims (USDOS, 2017). Another report in 2016 stated that Edo state recorded the highest number of rescued victims of human trafficking with 233 persons, representing 30.3% of the 769 persons who were Nigerians. Close to Edo state (in terms of the proportion of victims of sex trafficking) were Delta (8.9%) and Akwa Ibom (6.1%) – all south-south states (NAPTIP, 2016).

A situation worthy of note in this region of the country is the influence of social media in facilitating sex trafficking. This is due to globalization and advancement in technology. Studies such as that of Iyanda and Nwogwugwu (2016) have identified how technologies aid traffickers in avoiding being traced and evading arrest as well as in the secret recruitment of young women and teenage girls for sex trafficking purposes. While social media and other ICTs are becoming handy among traffickers, there have been suggestions that the social media can serve as a cost effective tool through which awareness and attitudinal change can be ensured. Consequently, such a study as this becomes important in the light of the worrisome trend of sex trafficking in South South Nigeria. Therefore, knowledge of this study is valuable for policy making and intervention programmes geared towards the creation of awareness and ensuring attitudinal change among susceptible citizens who may be tempted to fall for the rhetoric and intrigues of sex trafficker. By doing this, individuals are encouraged to make responsible decisions in the face of sex trafficking temptations. Consequently, the study examines the issues surrounding SNSs and users’ attitude towards sex trafficking in three south south states of Edo, Delta and Akwa Ibom.

### **Uses and Gratification Theory (UGT)**

The uses and gratification theory (UGT) was developed by Jay Blumler and Denis McQuail (1969). The UGT attempts to uncover factors or people’s motivation for the type of media they choose and what they use it for. The theory is based on the assumption that people who use the media are actively in charge of the technology and can control the way and manner they use the media. This notion counters the supposition that individuals are passive consumers of media. UGT therefore explores how people deliberately rationalize the media that they use to fulfill certain needs or goals such as entertainment, relaxation, or socializing.

When assessed within the context of the present study, the UGT basically helps us to understand the individuals’ (SNSs users and online sex traffickers) motivations for choosing to use the SNS in certain ways. It (the UGT) also shows how individual SNSs users control their access and uses to SNSs. For instance, SNSs users and online sex traffickers know what they want and they control their activities on the SNSs platforms whenever they’re logged in. These abilities put them in a position of power over the platforms. Also, using the UGT; both SNSs users and online sex traffickers expect to satisfy specific needs and desires. For instance while the SNSs users are on SNS platforms looking for companionship, friendship, love, economic opportunities and so forth, the online sex traffickers are actively involved on the same platforms to prey on unsuspecting users and eventually get them trafficked. Also in the context of the study, the UGT helps to explain the influence of the social and psychological factors such as age, sex, religion, SNS use and intensity on SNS users’ activities on the various platforms. As a consequence, the researchers find the theory relevant to the study since the research work seeks to understand the

factors influencing online sex trafficking and the process through which sex trafficking is facilitated on the SNSs in South-south Nigeria.

### Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study was to examine the issues surrounding SNSs and users' attitude towards sex trafficking in three south south states of Edo, Delta and Akwa Ibom. The study therefore sought to achieve the following specific objectives:

1. Determine how sex trafficking is facilitated through SNS.
2. Examine South-South users' attitude towards sex trafficking through SNS.
3. Ascertain the factors that facilitate online sex trafficking.

### Hypothesis

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a significant relationship between SNS users' attitude and their demographics even when the perceived factors that facilitate online sex trafficking are controlled for.

### Methods

A web-based survey design was employed. Couper (2000) saw the multimedia capability of Web surveys as a real advantage, as well as the option to customize survey options for particular groups of respondents. The lack of social cues on the SNSs is thought to make respondents more open (Sproull & Kiesler 1991). Additionally, since a face to face survey design on sensitive subject matter as sex trafficking might be difficult to conduct in person, the researchers adopted the method. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the University of Nigeria Nsukka, Enugu, Nigeria. Written informed consent was obtained from each participant after having been fully briefed on the study objectives.

The target population for this study includes: (1) all social networking sites' (SNSs) users, 18 years and above in the three selected South-South states of Edo, Delta and Akwa Ibom, Nigeria. Also, officials of the NAPTIP formed part of target population for the study.

The sample size of three hundred and eighty four (384) was statistically (using Cochran's formula) derived. The researchers adopted a web-based purposive sampling. This was done because purposive sampling of hidden populations through internet recruitment has become increasingly popular among researchers who, at a relatively low cost, use it to engage large samples of people who are otherwise difficult to access (Barratt et al., 2014). To undertake this technique, researchers recruited respondents using a campaign/advertisements targeted at SNSs users the States. The eligibility criteria was that respondents must: (1) have a verifiable SNS profile (2) be an active member of at least one social media platform – e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. (3) be willing to participate and (4) have been a resident in any of the three selected states for at least a year. Six officials of NAPTIP (from Edo and Akwa Ibom states) were purposively selected to partake in the In-depth Interview (IDI) sessions.

The primary instrument contained two sections. The first section was on questions relating to personal demographics and the frequency and intensity of daily SNS use. The second section elicited responses that bordered on the key research objectives that were developed for the study. The qualitative instrument for the study was the IDI guide. Reports of the Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) for the reliability test showed that scores for SNSUIS (SNSs Use and Intensity Scale) and SNSSTS (SNSs Sex Trafficking Scale) were .88, and .86, respectively. The combined  $\alpha$  score for the scales was .84.

In the administration of the questionnaire instrument, emails, Whatsapp and Facebook attachment (in the Microsoft document format) was sent to respondents who have signed up for the study. Potential respondents were often reminded to fill the questionnaire on time. A consent form was also attached to the questionnaire items that were distributed through the SNSs and other Internet platform (i.e., emails) used. Also, 6 in-depth interview (IDI) sessions (2 in each states) were held with officials of NAPTIP.

The researchers utilized an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) for the qualitative data. In order to identify themes from the data collected during the IDI sessions, key words and phrases, repetition of concepts and ideas (recurring ideas), indigenous categories, and metaphors and analogies (e.g., Ryan & Bernard, 2003) were employed.

The descriptive and inferential statistics were used for the quantitative data. The average mean value (cutoff point) for all the items in the scales was  $3.00 = \left( \frac{1+2+3+4+5}{5} \right)$ . Thus any item with mean value below 3.00 was considered low and those with the mean value of 3.00 and above were regarded as high in the analysis. The hierarchical regression statistic ( $R^2$ ) was used to test hypothesis in the study.

**Result**

**Demographic characteristics**

According to findings, there were more female (53.0%) than male (47.0%). A majority of the respondents were single (59.4%) and aged between 18-28 years (54.8%). Distribution according to educational qualification suggests that many of the respondents had SSCE (34.1%), OND (25.3%) and B.Sc/HND (34.7%). While more than half of the respondents were Christians (53.0%), 28.2% and 24.7% of the respondents were traders and civil servant respectively. About a quarter of the respondent earned less than \$50 (20,000 Nigerian Naira) (33.0%). Others earned above \$50 (67.0%).

**How Sex Trafficking is Facilitated through SNSs**

[Insert Table 1 here]

Table 1 above shows the findings on the perception of how sex traffickers manipulate the online space to lure unsuspecting users. As shown from the table, majority of the items were below the weighted mean of 3.00, indicating that many respondents did not have full knowledge of how traffickers maneuver the different social networking sites to entice users. Corroborating the data above, IDI participants responded to questions on the actual ways through which sex trafficking take place online. In mapping out perceptions of the study participants, majority of them remarked that the activities of SNSs users on these platforms make them easy targets. One of the activities mentioned was staying too long on social media platforms. Participants suggested that young people who are at risk become more vulnerable simply if they are spending a great deal of time on the social media. They also stated that such behaviour keeps young people isolated from their parents, real life friends and makes them incapable of starting or sustaining ‘real’ relationships. For example, one participant described how intense SNSs engagement could increase exposure to online sex trafficking:

Many young people these days have found a great companion in their smart phones in as much as they can power their phones. Cheap data subscription has also made it easy for many young people to stay online for several hours a day. They do this by signing up membership for all the social media sites, like Facebook, several blogs, Instagram, Twitter, etc. These multiple membership tends to increase their social media activities commitment to maintain their presence there. Whenever they are online they become isolated from the real things in life as well as their family and friends and thus they become susceptible to online acquaintances who offer them unrealistic things (**Male 39 years, Investigating and Monitoring, Benin Zonal Command**).

Although the implication of what participants spoke about was the fact that excessive SNSs consumption could expose unsuspecting users to crime, spending so much time on any or more of these platforms could impact on the real life, face to face, personal communication skills of the users. Another participant who made comparisons between the traditional mode of sex trafficking and the one enhanced by the new media described how posts, likes, sharing and comments made on social media by users puts them at risk of being targeted by SNSs predators:

Before all sex traffickers do is to scout [either in person or by proxy] for victims in real locations. However, it is a different game today. Now you can just hop online and be friends with somebody, especially that somebody who want to hear that they are beautiful, handsome and smart: these are the real targets. Traffickers attain this level of comfort online when they have understood the psyche of a person through their posts, comments, and the kind of things they share and so on (**Female 35 years, Public Enlightenment, Benin Zonal Command**).

As to the kind of things they shared, commented or posted, participants emphasised that they all revolve around themes of depression, frustration, lack of self-love, low self-esteem, body dissatisfaction, lack of contentment and desire for unrealistic and material things. One participant summarised the situation thus:

Really, traffickers look for individuals who are naïve, and needy. If they are talking about being sad and depressed, traffickers would say oh! That’s the guy I can recruit. I can get to that person; I can find a way into their lives; if I can make them feel better, I can tell them oh! You want this? You want that? I will give it to you and more (**Female, 35 years, Counseling and Rehabilitation, Uyo Zonal Command**).

The different accounts of participants is a reflection of the link between specific SNSs behaviours and susceptibility of users to online sex trafficking. Plausible reason for this situation is that young SNSs users would usually encounter have some sense of insecurity, feel isolated and depressed. These types of vulnerabilities are what online sex traffickers seek. Through a process known as grooming, the traffickers gain the trust of victims in a manner that they (traffickers) become a significant part of the victims’ lives.

On the contrary, participants described what traffickers do on the SNSs in order to attract unsuspecting individuals. For instance, participants stated that traffickers were in the habit of posting or paying for advertised job vacancies. They also maintained that traffickers like to participate on dating sites. As to the use of advertised job vacancies, participants hinted that such vacancies tend to be bogus, not informative, ambiguous and overpromising. The view of one of the participants is captured thus:

You find a lot of these on major job sites or some kinds of blogs. Most times, there is so little information on the job vacancy adverts; therefore you do not understand what the job is exactly and finally it sounds too good to be true (**Male, 45 years, Administration, Uyo Zonal Command**).

Participants also commented on how traffickers infiltrate dating sites or some other free friendship sites/applications. According to them, grooming (befriending and establishing an emotional connection with someone) was the process used by sex traffickers to gain victims' trust and acceptance. As an example, one participant commented on how this takes place:

Today, online dating is becoming the common means to meet and hookup with people and so sex traffickers are maximising this opportunity to get their targets. As soon as they are able to establish contact, they begin to groom these individuals who are mostly young and even teenage girls (**Male 39 years, Investigating and Monitoring, Benin Zonal Command**).

Also, participants spoke about the use of codes, signs and what is generally known as emojis, which sex traffickers use to lure victims. Some of the emojis identified by participants include: the heart (suggesting love), growing heart (suggesting a young heart that is subject to grow in love), airplanes (suggesting travelling), fire (suggesting that the person is attractive or sexy), among several others. According to participants, these coded communications could also be used between several traffickers to communicate the nature of victims already attracted or to monitor and track those who have already become trafficked victims.

#### ***Users' Attitude towards Sex Trafficking on SNSs in South-South, Nigeria***

[Insert Table 2 here]

Data from Table 2 shows how SNS users view sex trafficking especially in the south-south Nigeria. Results show that many respondents believed that most victims of sexual trafficking were women ( $3.71 \pm 1.39$ ). They also did not think that involving in sex trafficking was a way out of poverty ( $1.91 \pm 1.13$ ). However, on the average, respondents did believe that human trafficking must involve elements of physical force, restraint, bondage and or violence ( $3.22 \pm 1.40$ ). Overall, while many respondents have correct opinions about sex trafficking, they expressed some forms of misconceptions of sex trafficking.

While many IDI participants have correct opinions about sex trafficking, they noted that the idea of sex trafficking as crime is misconstrued among the public especially in the south-south region of Nigeria. Generally, participants believed that the public still holds the view that victims are complicit and share a greater amount of blame in getting trafficked. They felt that people still feel that victims of sex trafficking consented to their migration and eventual circumstances. This type of mindset according to the participants helps to deproblematise the evil of sex trafficking and modern day sex slavery. This mindset (for real life, face to face sex trafficking activities) posits a crucial implication for how sex trafficking takes place on the SNS. This means that the incorrect public attitude towards sex trafficking may be deepened due to its expansion into the virtual world. Also, the fact that the processes (e.g., arranging victims' passport, giving them loan to cover travelling costs and other expenses) of online sex trafficking may no longer be as stressful or cumbersome as that of the face to face real life sex trafficking gives one the reason to think that negative attitude towards the crime would continue to persist.

In addition, IDI participants perceived sex trafficking as an activity that is carried out physically, involving force and intense violence. Such attitude in the views of participants decimates the idea that social networking sites could be used to facilitate trafficking in persons in an unimaginable manner. As one participant put it, "people are blindfolded; they don't even know that sex trafficking takes place again... you know social media has made sex trafficking more discreet and unnoticed; so people actually think it is no longer rampant as it used to be" (**Male, 45 years, Administration, Uyo Zonal Command**).

#### ***The Factors Facilitating Online Sex Trafficking***

[Insert Table 3 here]

Table 3 presents respondents perception of the motivations for and facilitators of online sex trafficking. According to the results, average respondents felt that poverty ( $3.85 \pm 1.23$ ), economic realities ( $3.50 \pm 1.33$ ), high unemployment levels ( $3.81 \pm 1.27$ ), etc could motivate users to fall victim of sex trafficking gimmicks. In corroboration of the quantitative analyses presented above, IDI participants were asked talk about the factors that motivates and facilitates individuals to become victims of trafficking. To understand why people easily become victims of sex trafficking whether online or offline, participants suggest looking at the fundamental issues which are

tioned to the realities of our society. First, many participants believed that family pressure is one of the major factors to be considered. Participants mentioned how family members and friends play significant part in migration across the country's border and with the country. They posited that sex trafficking is not only facilitated by criminals who hide under secrecy (such as SNSs), but also by the 'normalisation' of trafficking in the study area. Participants suggested that people tended to normalise sex trafficking by placing it the category of the Nigerian 'hustle'; a form of 'struggle' or intense entrepreneurship, with eventual economic rewards. For example, one participant commented on how such sex trafficking become normalised and seen as a hustle:

You see it happens when some former sex trafficking victims who have made a fortune from the business and have become successful come back home; present their success story to people around... the next thing... is that they just start taking family and friends back with them.. The only thing is that they don't give details of their job description to people back home (**Male, 45 years, Administration, Uyo Zonal Command**).

"In Benin or even Warri or Akwa Ibom, you don't even refer to prostitution as what it is, they call it 'hustling'; it is 'forbidden' to call it prostitution or describe the job description as 'Ashawo' ", said another participant. "They have dignified the activity to that extent" (**Male 39 years, Investigating and Monitoring, BeninZonal Command**). Another participant who worked at the Public Enlightenment department hinted that any attempt to discourage people from engaging in trafficking in this area is often met with antagonism and strife. The participant cited instances where they have been attacked and their public enlightenment campaigns interrupted by locals who feel that NAPTIP efforts at curbing sex trafficking and other forms of trafficking in persons was a threat to what they believe.

Some even went to the extent of warning us not to pour 'sand sand' in their Garri [one of Nigeria's staple food]; maintaining that they were okay with what their daughters send to them from Europe. Their belief was that our campaigns would have a negative impact on their daughters who prostitute in Europe and would probably put a stop to whatever is remitted to them back home (**Male, 50 years, Public Enlightenment, Benin Zonal Command**).

To this end, the public enlightenment official noted that sex trafficking has now become a sort of competition among families. While some already have at least a daughter in Europe engaging in prostitution, others who don't have any one abroad look forward to a 'madam' who will arrange for the passage of their daughters to Europe. The participant however concluded that where the value of chastity and restraints attached to sexual activities are not strong, sex trafficking would most likely thrive.

Away from the cultural view of sex trafficking in the study area, participants touched on the subject of poverty and the daring economic realities of the present time. "Poverty is everywhere, people are suffering and are vulnerable to take on anything... due to over population everywhere," the participant said.

So whether it is physically or online, young women and even men open up to any type of 'opportunities'; not minding what it is. People want to escape poverty by travelling abroad or Europe because of the general belief that the streets in there are paved with gold and you don't have to work much to make a lot of money. So, any attempt to stop them from going is interpreted to mean that 'you are an enemy of progress' (**Male 39 years, Investigating and Monitoring, Benin Zonal Command**).

Therefore, before victims sign up for the journey (especially those that involve travelling across the shore of Nigeria), many of them are made to take secret oaths. The purpose of the oath according to participants was to scare young girls into blind obedience in a foreign land. This was usually done by casting spell and preparing concoction for the young women to drink. "By using 'juju' [African spell or magic] on these girls, they get to control them from anywhere" said a participant. The participant added that: "even though the 'juju' may just be some type of scam, the girls are psychologically meant to believe that if they disobey it will backfire on them and their family" (**Male, 45 years, Administration, Uyo Zonal Command**). Meanwhile victims were constantly threatened that their family members and relations would be harmed if they fail to keep to their end of what one of the participants called 'gentleman agreement'. More than any other factors or influences, oath taking appears to be the most powerful forms of bondage. Such activity could have long lasting impact on victims of sex trafficking; especially with regards to their psychological wellbeing even when they have eventually been trafficked to their destinations. The 'juju' oath-taking as a phenomenon also represents a particular type of difficulty that anti-trafficking efforts are yet to identify, let alone resolve.

Even if a young woman ends up in a safe or protected situation in Europe, she believes the juju oath will haunt her family in Nigeria and bring them bad luck. It is often for this reason that young women do not take advantage of the offer of protection under Article 18 of Italy's Consolidated Immigration Act, by which a woman is offered a temporary residence permit if she turns in the person controlling her. Anti-trafficking leaders know better

than to challenge the girls on whether the juju oath exists — they are careful not to challenge the women's beliefs. They treat it delicately, although many are uncertain about how to address it at all. As a result, by looking closely at these motivations and facilitating circumstances, we might begin to understand why sex trafficking can be appealing or controlling when it is rebranded on the virtual space.

### Hypothesis Testing

[Place Table 4 here]

To test this hypothesis, a hierarchical multiple regression was performed. As shown in the Table 4, result shows that the first model explained 79.2% of the SNS users' attitude towards SNSs sex trafficking ( $F(7,371)=198.331, p<.000$ ). A cursory inspection of the table indicates that gender ( $p=.000$ ), marital status ( $p=.000$ ), religion ( $p=.000$ ), occupation ( $p=.000$ ), age ( $p=.000$ ) and income ( $p=.000$ ) had a significant positive contribution to the prediction in the model, meanwhile educational qualification ( $p=.000$ ) negatively contributed to the attitude towards social media laws and regulations. The second model explained 95.5% of the SNS users' attitude towards SNSs sex trafficking ( $F(9,371)=861.365, p<.000$ ). In other words, the addition of perceived factors of SNSs sex trafficking to the regression model explained an additional 16.3% of the variation in attitude towards SNSs sex trafficking. While educational qualification ( $p=.000$ ), age ( $p=.000$ ), income ( $p=.000$ ), and knowledge of SNSs sex trafficking ( $p=.004$ ) negatively contributed to the second model, gender ( $p=.000$ ), religion ( $p=.004$ ), and perceived factors of SNSs sex trafficking had a positive contribution to the model. However, age ( $p=.089$ ) and marital status ( $p=.692$ ) did not contribute to the variance observed in the second model. From the result, it can be concluded that attitude towards SNS sex trafficking was largely predicted by their demographic characteristics when the perceived factors facilitating SNSs sex trafficking were included in the equation.

### Discussion

This study examined the issues surrounding SNSs and users' attitude towards sex trafficking in three south states of Edo, Delta and Akwa Ibom. The researchers found that many respondents did not have in-depth knowledge of how traffickers maneuver the different social networking sites to entice users. Nonetheless, they believed that traffickers could hide their identity online and pretend to be whom they are not in order to attract users. The findings have important implication for designing successful awareness raising intervention, which could improve the knowledge base of Internet users on how sex trafficking works online. Nonetheless, officials of NAP TIP described how online predators and traffickers 'work' on their potential victim through the process of grooming. According to participants, traffickers infiltrate dating sites or some other free friendship sites/applications and use emojis (the heart [suggesting love], growing heart [suggesting a young heart that is subject to grow in love], airplanes [suggesting travelling], fire [suggesting that the person is attractive or sexy], etc to lure victims. A few similar studies (e.g., Nicola et al., 2017; Whitney et al., 2018) have also shown how sex traffickers appeal to young women online. For example Whitney et al. (2018) in their examination of the use of emoticons in ads and their significance as a potential indicator of online sex trafficking, found that rose (15.44%), rosette (2.21%), money with wings (0.74%), heavy dollar sign (0.74%), growing heart (4.29%), cherry (4.74%), cherry blossom (7.88%) among others were observed in online human sex trafficking ads. In the place of physical conversation, using emojis and other codes or signs gives the online sex trafficking world a huge covering and protects the clandestine activity from being noticed. The findings could be useful for fields of criminology and cyber security in designing intervention programmes aimed at addressing the issue under study.

Findings further revealed that while many respondents have correct opinions about sex trafficking, they expressed some forms of misconceptions of sex trafficking. Some of the opinions were that sex trafficking issues are not gendered, a wide spread problem and that it is their responsibility to protect people from falling victims. Nonetheless, on the average, respondents did not think that sex trafficking affected them directly. They also did believe that human trafficking must involve elements of physical force, restraint, bondage and or violence and that the SNS could not be used to prevent trafficking online. Additionally, IDI participants confirmed that such misconceptions (as revealed in the quantitative data) and more exist among members of the public. For instance, the participants stated that the public still holds the views that trafficking outside the shores of Nigeria could be lucrative and that victims are complicit and share a greater amount of blame in getting trafficked. These results were similar to findings that have shown acceptance of other types of myths to be related to belief of disclosures and victim blame (Cromer & Freyd, 2007; Frese et al., 2004; Cunningham & Cromer, 2014). Myths concerning rape (Burt, 1980; Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010), child sexual abuse (Cromer & Goldsmith, 2010), and prostitution (Cotton et al., 2002) serve to justify violence against women and children, thereby reinforcing the social norm of denial and victim blame. Sex trafficking myths appear to serve a similar function by denying or justifying the sale or trade of human beings for sexual purposes. Also, within the SNS context, sex trafficking activities are entrenched because of the multiplex of these misconceptions. Overall, the study findings

highlights an important reality about sex trafficking and how much people know about this phenomenon. Therefore, the apparently wrong misconceptions about sex trafficking could be tackled through educational programmes to correct these misperceptions.

As found in the study, poverty, harsh economic realities, high unemployment levels, the perception that sex trafficking might be a lucrative business, 'success story' of some individuals who were victims of sex trafficking (especially in terms of financial remittance to family and friends back home), normalisation of sex and sex trafficking, family pressure as well as the expectation that sex trafficking provide 'overnight' riches were identified by respondents and IDI participants as fundamental reasons why SNSs users may fall victim of sex trafficking gimmicks.

The study findings corroborate with several other studies that have been carried out elsewhere (Deshpande & Nour, 2013; Konstantopoulos et al., 2013; Majeed & Malik, 2017; Seo-Young, 2015; Yadoglah, 2018). These studies have found that being out-of-school, unemployed, uneducated and unemployed parents, poverty, environmental and socio-cultural factors were factors mentioned as risk factors associated with sex trafficking in different studies. A study done in Nigeria reported that 77.2%, 68.4%, 56.1%, 44.5% of the participants reported poverty, unemployment, illiteracy and low social status respectively as factors associated with sex trafficking (Zimmerman et al., 2013). The findings in the present study further highlights the role of these factors in the understanding of sex trafficking activities and why it still continues to pose as a huge problem in the study area. By addressing the identified root causes of sex trafficking and correcting the culture of tolerance for sex and prostitution (especially when it involves exploitations), both online and offline sex trafficking practices might be reduced to the barest minimum.

Based on the result of the hypothesis, it was concluded that attitude towards SNS sex trafficking was to a large extent predicted by their demographic characteristics when the perceived factors facilitating SNSs sex trafficking was included in the equation. The findings reecho the evidence from related studies (Bishop et al., 2013; Digidiki & Baka, 2017; Ngban, Maliki & Asuquo, 2009; Shrestha et al., 2015), which showed that demographic characteristics account for and helps to understand how populations view sex trafficking. For instance, Ngban et al. (2009) concluded that age, gender and residential location of the people of South-South, Nigeria significantly influence their perception of human trafficking. The present study extends this evidence by providing a link between demographic characteristics, knowledge and perceived motivations and facilitators of sex trafficking and how they could influence attitude towards such activities. The findings of the present study have implications as it could encourage policy designers and interventionists to put into context, differences in SNSs users' demographic characteristics and perception of sex trafficking.

The findings of the present study have revalidated the majority of the key assumptions of the theory of UGT. For example, the present study found that personal demographics of the respondents (e.g., gender, education, occupation and income) influence attitude towards SNS sex trafficking. Consequently, the UGT basically helps us to understand the individuals' (SNSs users and online sex traffickers) motivations for choosing to use the SNS in certain ways. Also, the findings of the study showed that expectations to satisfy specific needs and desires such as finding friendships, relationships, employment and other needs motivated SNSs users to use the platforms to meet these needs. On the other hand, it was found that sex traffickers were motivated by the need to deceive unsuspecting SNSs users to sex trafficking. These have confirmed the UGT premise that posits that media users expect to satisfy specific needs and desires. The findings of the study further indicated that both SNSs users and online sex traffickers are active users who control their access and usage of the SNSs. As a consequence, the UGT was found relevant to the study it helps us to understand the factors influencing online sex trafficking and the process through which sex trafficking is facilitated on the SNSs in South-south Nigeria.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings of the project work, the researchers conclude as follows:

1. SNSs sex trafficking is a serious problem. The majority did not understand the process of online sex trafficking. Some of the process, through which such sex trafficking activities occurs involve the ways some SNSs users present themselves online and how sex traffickers identify such presentations and take advantage of it. The study therefore suggests that online sex trafficking is an issue that the public knows very little about. It is one thing to be aware of its existence, is another thing to have in-depth understanding and knowledge of how it operates. Having the understanding of how sex trafficking works online could go a long way to equip SNSs users with the right response and how to protect themselves from exploitation. This implies that sex trafficking education is the greatest sex trafficking prevention tool.



2. Economic, socio-cultural and political factors could play a role in influencing sex trafficking both offline and on the SNSs. Therefore, by addressing these fundamental issues and challenges, the root cause of sex trafficking would have been tackled to a large extent.
3. Knowledge of SNSs sex trafficking, personal demographic and SNSs use characteristics affect attitude towards SNSs sex trafficking.

The researchers therefore suggest that government, tech giants, platforms owners, anti-trafficking organizations and security agencies working with other partners should increase the awareness of online sex trafficking by supporting the development and implementation of evidenced-based programmes targeted towards the youths and SNSs users.

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