Social Construction of Child Sexual Abuse: Messages on Nigerian Facebook Networks

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse is one of the most serious public health problems facing society. Its coverage by the media exposes the public to the ills as well as strategies of reducing its prevalence. Although studies have shown the use of traditional media in disseminating child sexual abuse (CSA) stories, they have neglected to examine sexual health narratives or ways through which social media construct in constructing child sexual abuse. Paradoxically, while the views of Nigerian Facebook users were predominantly text-framed (98.6%), posts presented through multiple frames attracted more attention, evoked more reactions, comments and likes, and shared 8,494 times relative to the highest text-only frames shared 321 times. Users frame child sexual abuse as a bad thing and drove a narrative of change. Accordingly, most comments focused on advocacy (37.9%) and condemnation (32.9%) of CSA. The manifest content shows that more Nigerian Facebook users advocate for an end to child sexual abuse. This social construction of reality has implications for the development of young people's sexual health and policy formation in Nigeria.

Keywords: Child sexual abuse, Sexual health narratives, Framing, Facebook posts, Social construction.

Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is one of the serious public health challenges in society, occurring especially to children and young people (Pereda, Guilera, Forns & Go´mez-Benito, 2009; O'Leary,

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2010; Pasura, Jones, Hafner, Maharaj, Nathaniel-Decaire & Johnson, 2012). It is a universal issue that has core implications of the sociocultural, psychological and physical wellbeing of the child, and with long- and short-term consequences on victims. Child sexual abuse transcends penetration to other forms of sexual behaviors, including exposing a child to pornography, and soliciting a child to engage in physical and nonphysical sexual activities. Incidents of CSA are now reported on a daily basis across media outlets, including social media.

The World Health Organization (WHO, 2006, p.10) describes child sexual abuse as "the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared." It stresses that children are susceptible to sexual abuse from adults or other children who are in a position of responsibility, trust, or power over the victim because they are older. The phenomenon requires urgent attention to safeguard the health and human rights of the girl-child across the world. This is particularly necessary in Asia and Africa that have been identified as having the highest prevalence rates of child sexual abuse (UNICEF, 2016).

Studies on child sexual abuse have previously centred on traditional media presentation of the stories or analysis of impact (Awosola & Omoera, 2008; Omoera & Awosola, 2008; Cheit, Shavit & Reiss-Davis, 2010; Babatsikois, 2010; Finkelhor, 2014; Weatherred, 2015). They neglected the formats and focus of audience's discussion on a platform that allows for citizens engagement. Conversations on CSA by digital media users can determine its portrayal, thus, the need to explore the focus and format of the content as expressed by Nigerian social media users. This is important because people's opinions and interests are likely to reflect in their posts, comments and the topics mostly discussed on their digital media platforms (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy & Silvestre, 2011), hence, the current retrieval of Facebook users' notions about child sexual abuse. The emergence of the interactive Internet and the proliferation of social networking sites and weblogs have created a paradigm shift in citizen's engagement of socio-cultural issues (Hanna, Rohm & Crittenden, 2012; Briones, Kuch, Liu & Jin, 2011). It is now possible for citizens separated by distance to engage and discuss child sexual abuse, which is a recurrent issue in the news (Schultz, Utz & Goritz, 2011). Until

recently, citizens were passive recipients of media narratives without having an input on what the media publish. With mobile and web-based technology, social media create high interactive platforms through which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content (Kietzman, et al., 2011)

As a global phenomenon, child sexual abuse is one of the social issues getting attention on social media with various contributions from people of different orientations. New media technology allows individuals to become sources of online information, permitting them to share opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with others (Marken, cited by Veil, Buehner and Palenchar, 2011). While sharing, they collectively frame issues. Social media play an increasing role in the social construction of issues through collective action frames (Schultz, et al., 2011). Driven by collective framing theory, the study was guided by these questions: What is the dominant format adopted in framing child sexual abuse by Nigerian Facebook users? What is the dominant focus of messages expressed by Facebook users? Answering these questions will determine the role of social media for citizens' participation in social-cultural issues and its implications on CSA construction.

Some Child Sexual Abuse Cases in Nigeria

Child sexual abuse is becoming public in Nigeria. Although the society has been silent to the occurrence, the media is currently playing their corporate social responsibility by making public these activities through news reportage. Some of the cases are expressed in different ways and reported in different media. In an editorial of *Punch* (2016*)* newspaper of May 19, 2016, titled the "Rising pandemic of child sexual abuse", the writer recalled cases of published child sexual abuse to show its prevalence in Nigeria. It recounted a 24-year old who was arraigned at a magistrate's court in Lagos for allegedly defiling his neighbour's three-year-old daughter. It also revealed series of child abuse, including a primary five pupil in Bariga who was gang-raped by six men in January, 2016, a 49 year old man who allegedly raped his seven-year-old daughter, a father who defiled his 17-year-old daughter and violated his 18-month-old granddaughter, and a 26 year old man who was arrested for defiling his 10 years old cousin. In Katsina,

it was noted that "all the 13 rape victims treated in the past four months in the hospital were below 13 years of age".

Furthermore, "a 35-year old man was arrested for allegedly raping his wife's 15-year-old sister", and "a man raped his 12-year-old daughter in Ogba, Bayelsa State". These are just a tip of what happens daily but unreported. Girls are identified as the most victims of child sexual abuse. The reported cases are a mere fraction of what happens regularly (Weatherred, 2015). Although under several sections of the country's criminal code, CSA is a grave offence, but victims are never punished, hence, the prevailing increases. Child marriage is a form of child sexual abuse because the child is married off at a young age and expected to carry out all responsibilities of a wife, including sexual activities. In Nigeria, child marriage is a complex and controversial topic as various views are supported and defended by ethno-religious, socio-cultural and regional values. Child marriage is rooted in the cultural traditions of the Hausa-Fulani communities in Northwest Nigeria (Anthony, 2013; UNFPA, 2012; United Nations Population Fund, 2012; Ford Foundation, 2011). For Fayokun (2015), Islam has permeated and saturated the socio-cultural life of the Hausa-Fulani, making the Islamic law and jurisprudence a major part of the native law and custom, especially on issues of personal law relating to marriage and family life.

Theoretical Framework

Framing theory was adopted and complemented by social construction theory, both of which have their foundations from sociological imaginations. Framing is a communication theory popularized by Robert Entman (1993), who stated that "[t]o frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman as cited in Scheufele, 1999, p.107). When a certain element of a topic is accorded more attention than others, it is more understood (deVreese, 2005). Framing is based primarily on media effects and the interpretation of issues is dependent on the meaning the framer wishes to pass to the reader. Hossain (2015:521), citing Reese, says framing is "an organizing principle that connects media content to broader issues related to political and social power." It is giving salience to issues. When framing, a

certain point is intensified and accorded more attention such that everyone who reads the communicative text can reason along the writer' points of view.

Entman's framing theory focuses on the transmission of information from the mass media to the audience. With the emergence of digital technology, scholars have called for the need to apply framing to user generated contents. Nisbet as cited by Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013, p.564) asserts that: this bottom up, or emergent, conceptualization is important to consider because it changes the focus of framing studies from traditional media and hierarchical gatekeepers to ordinary, everyday citizens that easily and regularly produce (online) media, and who ultimately become 'active contributors, creators, commentators, sorters, and archivers of digital news content'. Based on emerging communication structures, framings are adopted in studying collective actions and social media interactions. Groshek and Al-Rawi (2013, p.9) studied critical framing of the 2012 U.S. presidential campaign in Facebook and Twitter and observed that all comments about Obama had "positive descriptors" while his opponent, Mitt Romney had "negative descriptors." They argued that the result from the collective action comments negates the idea that social media is highly partisan because even on Romney's wall, Obama had more positive descriptors. Their study also established the idea that "the sentiment observed within social media spaces may well reciprocally reflect or lead public opinion, voting behaviour, and traditional (mass) media agendas" (p.11).

As well, Lim (2013) studied collective/connective action in the 2010–11 Tunisian uprising and noted that the 2010 uprising was a success because activists successfully managed to bridge the distance in location and class in addition to converging offline and online activism. This was achieved by effectively aligning frame with a "master narrative that culturally and politically resonated with the entire population" (p. 921). He added that "activation of a hybrid network that reflects the cultural and technological logic" of the media facilitates connective structures that generate collective action among "Tunisians who shared collective identities and collective frames, and connective action among individuals who sought more personalized paths to contribute to the movement through digital media" (p. 938). While the theoretical foundations and development of framing are located in interpretive sociology,

which assumes that people's interpretation of reality depends on interaction and definition of situations (Ardèvol-Abreu, 2015), social construction of reality is an aspect of micro interpretive theory perspectives in sociology (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social construction emphasizes the socially-related creative nature of social life that is actively and creatively produced by human beings in society. People create society, which eventually becomes a reality. Both theoretical perspectives assume that reality is socially created through human interactions in the social world. The study of child sexual abuse adopts both theories in line with the growing attention given to social media activism and engagement. The comments and posts on Facebook create and recreate social reality through collective human actions.

Methods

The study adopted quantitative research method in collecting data. Content analysis was used to examine the way Nigerian Facebook users construct child sexual abuse messages. It described the format and focus of the content users generated through comments on Facebook posts. Content analysis was employed because it features as the best method used in examining social media posts and audience feedback. Since the contents of such interactions are preserved over time, content analysis explores them for specific purposes. The study period, April 2013- April 2017, was selected because media reportage was of CSA cases was high within the period of study. It enabled the capturing of all the relevant posts and comments. The sample size was forty-one Facebook posts, with 3068 relevant comments. The data for the study is collected from Facebook, using the search bar to harvest posts on CSA. Coding sheet was designed to enable the analysis. The posts on child sexual abuse and the comments by Facebook users constitute the study data. The coding categories are formats and focus of the stories. Only manifest content was analysed.

Formats of Posts

Facebook posts are presented through various formats, also referred to as frames in this paper. These frames include pictures, videos, and texts, but some posts combine two or more formats.

Texts: These are posts presented in words and intelligible letters.

Pictures: These are still images, graphics, cartoons and animations. They are great appeal to sight due to colourful and attractive presentations.

Videos: These are messages disseminated through moving visual images. Messages by visual media can be very powerful and more accessible than textual piece for some individuals, especially those with little intellectual abilities (Brady, Young & Mcleod, 2015). They are used to illustrate or share information about specific issues. While the format is captured through text, pictures and more than one frame, including video, focus of stories in child sexual abuse is categorised as awareness, advocacy, occurrence, health risk, prevention, condemnation, and others. Facebook posts on CSA and the comments other users made on them were retrieved for manual coding. The data relied on the network's search engine algorithm. Descriptive statistics was employed for analysis, using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

Results and Discussion

Social media posts are presented through various means for easy comprehension. They are important in influencing the level of user interactions and framed to interest readers. Frames include pictures, videos, texts-hash tags (#), and the embedded links and hyperlinks. The social construction of child sexual abuse on Facebook is actualized through format and focus of posts, which drive diverse benefits for comprehension and retention of information. Some posts combine two or more formats as observed in the dominant format of child sexual abuse.

Format of Child Sexual Abuse posts

Different formats are used for the presentation of child sexual abuse posts on Facebook in order to cater for the different strengths and weaknesses of each frame. They play major roles in the way through which the issue is framed and perceived by Facebook users. The research question is premised on the fact that if the major format of posts is easy to frame, social network-based interaction will mainly reflect the views of users about CSA. Hence, the examination of the dominant format of child sexual abuse posts on Facebook in the context of its prevalence and frequency of

reportage. A total of 3,068 comments were made on the 41 posts published on child sexual abuse during the study period. On the average, 75 comments were made on each of the posts. Out of the totally analysed comments 98.6% views were expressed in text while the remaining was non-text framed (Table 1). Nigerian Facebook users expressed their understanding and knowledge of child sexual abuse while establishing their stance on this sociocultural issue.

Table 1: Format of Child Sexual Abuse Post

Formats	Frequency	Percent
Text	3024	98.6
Pictures	22	0.7
More than one	22	0.7
Total	3068	100.0

From the table, while text was the most frequently adopted format of posts, picture-based contributions and combined formats of posts were 0.7% each. No comment on posts was in a video format, rather, GIF images which are digressive and non-relevant to the topic of discourse were observed. The finding affirms the submission of Kucherenko (2016) that texts are easy to jumble together to present thoughts, while graphics and pictures are not readily available to contribute to a conversation. This explains the prominence of text-based posts on child sexual abuse on Facebook. To have ongoing discussions, therefore, Facebook users would rather present their thoughts through text rather than graphics. Even though visuals help get the attention of the reader, Kucherenko (2016) and Johnson (2013) note that it is the wordings that communicate the facts and data. Johnson (2013) analysed six brands that publish photos and texts on their Instagram profiles. She observed that the posts with texts had two times engagement rate than image-only posts, adding that texts give room for questioning which in turn creates pace for engagement and a better narrative. On the other hand, graphics and pictures are not readily available to contribute to a conversation. Wagner (2017) and Edward (2017) agree that texts are the major means of framing to

motivate user interaction because they create a more dialogic context. Social media users have mastered the art of framing posts and know how the message posted can drive a narrative along their lines of thought and judgement. Text formats readily enhance social media discourse.

Using multiple post formats is, however, necessary in reinforcing views as well as helping readers gain a mental knowledge and imagination of what the sender is saying. The combination of text, graphic and video in the presentation of information is important as it provides added benefits for the comprehension and retention of information. This is because, people remember about 10% of information three days after its presentation but retain up to 65% of information if paired with a relevant image (Mawhinney, 2017). There is therefore need for readers to retain information accessed on the platform as well as contribute to the construction and meanings they attach to child sexual abuse. While text provides room for understanding, picture gives a clearer understanding by helping the mind create a strong mental image of the message. Some posts presented by using more than one format attracted more attention than those presented in single formats. In other words, combined formats evoked more reactions by virtue of their attracting more comments, likes and shares. This is likely because of the accompanying text, which gives apt description about the attached visual component. For example, from a post, on July 5, 2017, a female Facebook user narrates her experience on domestic violence and child sexual abuse, a recurrent issue in everyday news. The post was shared 8,494 times relative to a text-only post with the highest shares of 321.

From the ongoing discourse, new media technology allows private individuals to become sources of online information, 'sharing opinions, insights, experiences and perspectives with others (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011). The collective framing of CSA on Facebook shares is also achieved through Twitter retweet, which enables people share a narrative they support and endorse, and spread the same message to other people within their network (Oladapo & Ojebuyi, 2017). This supports the claim that "share" feature on Facebook is a correlate of the "retweet" feature on Twitter. This confirms the finding of Kucherenko (2016) and Johnson (2013) that the wordings communicate the facts because they promote question asking, furthering a conversation and facilitating an engagement. Accordingly, those who engage socio-cultural and societal issues on Facebook networks make readers understand and reason along the perceived line of thought by

employing texts to relay messages that will evoke responses from other users. The importance of pictures as information format is that they require very little thinking effort by readers and can easily get and sustain attention (Evoluted, 2012). Messages that are paired with a relevant image make people remember and retain information (Mawhinney, 2017).

Focus of Child Sexual Abuse Posts

Establishing the construction of child sexual abuse (CSA) among Nigerian Facebook users is important to explaining the focus of their posts as a means of pointing in the direction of what they think and the value attached to CSA. If social media constitute a platform for sociocultural discourse, the contents of the interaction become the basis for inference and mental definition of the social issues. The section examines the likely social construction of CSA by members of the Facebook community through the focus of their posts. Table 2 shows that Facebook users' comments focused on six broad categories, however, most of the posts are centered on advocacy (37.9%) and condemnation (32.9%) of CSA.

Table 2: Focus of child sexual abuse post

Focus	Frequency	Percent
Awareness	494	16.1
Advocacy	1164	37.9
Occurrence	118	3.8
Health Risk	86	2.8
Prevention	186	6.1
Condemnation	1008	32.9
Others	12	0.4
Total	3068	100.0

The focus of their views portrayed their standpoint on the social issue. Facebook was mostly used to advocate for an end to child sexual abuse. User comments were geared towards condemnation of the act. They also used the medium to raise public awareness about the existence and prevalence of the issue in Nigeria, as well

as the possible ways of preventing it. Posts suggesting ways of guarding against being a victim of CSA are directed to both parents (mostly mothers) and children (especially female children). This reveals the gender construction of child sexual abuse. This is because; girls in the Nigerian society are most times blamed for becoming victims to sexual abuse due to several factors, including dressing. This logic is skewed as recent cases of rape show that even when girls are completely covered, they are still exposed to rape. Child sexual molestation also occurs as babies have also become victims of sexual abuse. Some others occur in the house as fathers, uncles, and bothers, among other family members and friends, exploit the sexuality of young girls.

Because of stigmatization of the victims, who are mostly females, the culture of silence exists on this issue. In other words, people refrain from speaking out when they are sexually abused. However, some of the comments focused attention on reporting the occurrence of child sexual abuse or supplying a link to an online website that reports such news. A few comments focused on the health implications of abusing a child. The results show that people would prefer to see an end to child sexual abuse in society. The high frequency of advocacy posts makes it obvious that the mental frame of Facebook users is to see an end to this social issue. The social construction of child sexual abuse on Nigerian Facebook is to use text to condemn and raise awareness in the virtual media environment. This will stimulate the consciousness of Nigerians about the reality of CSA. It is a wakeup call on people to stay alert and prevent child sexual abuse. The finding conforms to Kietzmann's (2011) assertion that users have different discourse preferences, aims, motivations and control over what they post and say. As Zuniga, Jung, and Valenzuela (2012) note, there is no reason to think that people who are motivated to follow public affairs and current issues will not use their Social Networking Sites profile to use, contribute and share information that is public-oriented and opinionated. People make strongly opinionated comments with majority of the posts advocating for a stop in child sexual abuse. They propose different methods of curbing the menace, ranging from strong legal framework to capital punishment for offenders.

Participation in an online advocacy network can expand or contract their degree of participation. The most passionate members bear the heavy burden of operational tasks, but the less engaged members are critical for sharing the information wide with their social connections. Going by this, it can be inferred that the 37.9% advocacy comments point at those who are passionate about seeing an end of CSA and are bold to share the advocacy messages widely among their social networks. Advocacy messages take a large portion of the comments expressed by the Nigerian Facebook network users, indicating that most people prefer to share advocacy messages and engender public support towards the eradication of child sexual abuse.

Posts where Facebook users' condemn the act in strong language was another major focus of child sexual abuse posts. The people expressed views that disapproves of the practice, condemns the perpetrators and calls for stiff punishment for offenders. Some of the strong words employed to condemn the act include, "these animals must be stopped", "we must protect our children from these beasts", "…it's a shame Nigeria can't still protect her girl child from this dishonour", "…sex with a child is highly immoral…", "…injustice towards children…". The same is observed in the number of comments geared towards creating awareness. This diversity in comments and freedom of users to state their stance on CSA suggests the capacity and capability of social media users to transcend from dissemination of information to capacity building. Moulden (2015) claims that the conversation on child sexual abuse has moved from information dissemination by traditional media only because social media networks allow people to share information also, making them sources and resources of information, and sharing news as it is happening . This is reflected in a comment by a male Facebook user on March 7:

> This is a reason I will never stop talking about sexual abuse. It happens. It happens to kids, and by kids. Whatever happened to these young people to want to commit this injustice towards this student is incredibly sad. I hate that other young people have to go through such heartache….

In the comment, his intention was clear as to what his message was geared towards; awareness about sexual abuse to children.

He gave the reason why he will never stop talking about it, the fact that "it happens". He repeated his standpoint 3 times in his post. These findings call attention to the quality of interactions taking place within social media networks concerning the phenomenon rather than the superficial content of just networking. Social media network gives room for expression of individuals' intentions and benefits that the society will derive from them. The findings suggest that social media interactions between users and citizen help portray the pulse and reasoning of society concerning societal issues. This is made possible because of the lack of restrain or censorship of ideas, enabling users to express their views without any harassment.

Results resonate with some of the assumptions of social construction of reality theory that people jointly construct understandings of the world. This forms the basis for shared assumptions about reality (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). Since it is unlikely that people within a social network will have a direct connection with each other to discuss their understanding about certain issues about their world, they directly network on social media to compensate for the distance between them in real life. In the contents of their comments, users who directly network and relate with child sexual abuse posts express their positions, opinions and thoughts. They made direct comments that show their affection, support or disapproval of the news and posts about the occurrence of another sexual abuse of a child. Users see the need for increased awareness, advocacy and policies to stop it and call out the perpetrators. They also expressed the need for parents to make concerted efforts in taking drastic actions to prevent children from being victims of abuse. Basically, users and social media sites have different discourse preferences and aims (Kietzmann, 2011). People use Social Network Sites for personal identity construction, social relationships and entertainment. They also use their profile to contribute to and share information that is public-oriented and opinionated. As a source of motivation for users' interaction, Facebook users consciously frame communication to evoke certain views and reactions from those that they are connected with.

Conclusion

Child sexual abuse on Facebook was socially constructed using frames that enabled users to interact easily on the platform. The

format of presentation of the information was mostly through text but posts with combined frames got more attention as evident in the number of "shares", "likes", and comments they received. The information was shared and liked by many people, who invariably create, recreate and expand the information on Child sexual abuse. Although many areas of CSA were covered in the discourse, the focus was mostly on advocacy against the social issue and condemnation of the act. Facebook users reflect what they mean and want. Although child sexual abuse occurrence is on the rise, the comments on social media have a great role to play with implication on advocacy, awareness and prevention. The analysis shows a high frequency of posts that are geared towards advocacy to end child sexual abuse. Because the rate of CSA occurrence is still high, further research should examine why th prevalence despite the high advocacy on social media in Nigeria. Focusing future studies in this direction will contribute to knowledge development and policy formation in Nigeria.

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