

Social media, sexual harassment and rape discourse in Nigeria: an exploratory study

Redes sociales, acoso sexual y discurso de violación en Nigeria: un estudio exploratorio

Ayodeji Awobamise, O*

Kampala International University - Uganda

ayodeji.awobamise@gmail.com

Yosra Jarrar*

American University in Dubai - United Arab Emirates

yjarrar@aud.edu

Sheila Nnauife*

Girne American University - Cyprus

sheila.ogy@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

According to the findings of this study, Instagram users generally sympathize with rape victims, but are more likely to victim-blame when the victim is older than 18 and when the alleged rapist is a popular person or celebrity. The findings also show that social media have helped facilitate rape discourse in Nigeria, by providing a platform where survivors can share their story and create awareness about the problem of sexual abuse.

Keywords: Social media, Rape discourse, sexual harassment, #metoo

RESUMEN

Según los hallazgos de este estudio, los usuarios de Instagram generalmente simpatizan con las víctimas de violación, pero tienen más probabilidades de culpar a la víctima cuando la víctima es mayor de 18 años y cuando el presunto violador es una persona popular o una celebridad. Los resultados también muestran que las redes sociales han ayudado a facilitar el discurso de violación en Nigeria, al proporcionar una plataforma donde las sobrevivientes pueden compartir su historia y crear conciencia sobre el problema del abuso sexual.

Palabras clave: redes sociales, discurso de violación, acoso sexual, #metoo

*Corresponding author.

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INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of social media platforms, they have been used in raising awareness and mobilizing for social causes around the world (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014). Several cases of such social media use abound: the Egyptian revolution that ousted Hosni Mubarak from power in 2010, the occupy Nigeria protest that took place in Lagos, Abuja and other parts of the country in January 2012 following the announcement by federal government that fuel subsidy had been removed are all cases in point where social media were used as means of creating awareness and securing public mobilization for an action. In another development, social media cannot be perfectly adjudged as completely good for societal development given that they sometimes serve as means of inciting violence and perpetrating some negative behaviors especially among the youths. The Cynthia Onukogu incidence of 2012 is a case in point where social media were used as a means of perpetrating crime punishable by law in Nigeria (Agaba, 2013). Whether we accept it or not, social media are powerful socialization agents that may rely on simplification, distortions of realities, dramatic symbols and stereotypes to communicate messages from which consumers learn and model many of their behaviors (Potter, 2001; Sparks, 2002; Armakan, 2017).

Undoubtedly, the proliferation of social networking sites in the 21st century has changed the way media content is produced and distributed. Not only had the medium encouraged users to get full control of posting material without care of copyright laws of infringement or libel/obscenity regulations, it had also equipped individuals with the freedom and ability to create and distribute sexual contents (Boyd, 2007; Sohrabi, 2017), featuring either themselves or others. Not only is gate-keeping in standby mode in this arena, but traditional media facilitate the spread of this content, and in certain cases help reinforce a rape culture within society (Armstrong & Mahone, 2016; Hasani Hossienabadi, 2016).

Although there are many ways to define sexual assault, it is ultimately society's attitudes and attributions that determine how it is labeled (Burt, 1980). This is to say that the meaning of sexual assault or rape is relative from one country or society to another. This accounts for the differences in the views of experts on the concept.

However, cases of rape or rape related offence incidences abound in Nigeria and one of the most tear eliciting factor about such cases is that most of these incidences are perpetrated by the people who are expected to protect the rights and lives of the violated person or persons. According to Amnesty International, police forces in Nigeria are reported to have perpetrated acts of rape and other sexual abuse against women in different places and locations usually while carrying out their duty of protecting the lives of the people (Amnesty international, 2014). Some of these acts occur in public, or while some women are transferred to police stations, or while they visit male detainees in police custody; and sometimes police used sexual violence in order to extract confessions and other information.

With no way to run and with no one to speak to, rape victims and their supporters are now turning to social media to tell their stories, share their experiences and call out their victimizers. This study therefore seeks to find out why victims of rape and sexual assault choose to share their stories online, the feedback they get and the role social media play in bringing attention to the prevalence of sexual harassment in Nigeria.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to understand why people share their experiences online, what they hope to achieve, the responses they get from their online audiences and finally how social media can help in expanding the discourse on rape prevention in Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

RAPE: A MYTH OR REALITY IN NIGERIA

A study of polytechnic students in Ibadan revealed that 1.7 percent of 2.5% of males and 1.1% of females) had raped and 2.7% (5.3% of males and 0.9% of females) had attempted rape in their lifetime (Olaleye & Ajuwon, 2012).

Out of a sample of 295 female students from Ebonyi State University Abakaliki, Southeast Nigeria, 36.7% had experienced sexual harassment/victimization at least once on campus. Of this, 32.4% had been raped which is 10.8% of the sample (Emma-Echiegu, Ogbonnaya, & Ogbonnaya, 2013). Similarly, a study comparing the sexual practices of 12- to 19-year-old students with and without mild/moderate intellectual disabilities from schools across Oyo State, Nigeria revealed that 68.3% of the intellectually disabled females reported a history of rape victimization compared to 2.9% of the non-disabled females (Aderemi, Pillay, & Esterhuizen, 2013).

More revealing is the finding from a study conducted in Ile-Ife between 2007-2011 which analyzed hospital records of 76 sexual assault victims and demonstrated that the majority (76.1%) of the victims that sought help at a hospital did so within 24 hours of their sexual assault (Badejoko, et al., 2014). According to studies conducted by the CLEEN Foundation (2013), only about 28% of rape cases are reported to the relevant authorities and that about 1 in 3 Nigerians personally know a rape victim. The implication is that the vast majority of rape incidents go unreported. However, this study is premised on the belief that there is an uptick in the number of rape survivors sharing their stories via social media and it is against this backdrop that the study seeks to understand if social media are challenging the prevalent understanding of rape and encouraging anti-rape discourse in the Nigerian society.

RAPE COVERAGE AND THE RE-VICTIMIZATION OF VICTIMS

There is ample empirical evidence to support the fact that media influence audiences' response to and perception of certain events or issues. Studies by Ardovini-Brooker and Caringella-MacDonald, Reynolds and Kenyon and Marjoribanks all focus on how media have the capacity to influence audience perception of certain issues and thus advocated for responsible

journalism when reporting news (Ardevini-Brooker & Caringella-MacDonald, 2002; Reynolds, 2002; Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2008; Varela et al., 2017). These studies mainly examined rape coverage from a framing perspective and considered the media as a tool that can be used to advocate for social and behavioral change when wielded properly.

While considering how mainstream media cover rape cases and related incidence in Nigeria, Nwabueze and Oduah, revealed that the media re-victimize rape victims in their coverage. The study which adopted the content analysis research method concluded that the nature of newspapers coverage of rape incidences in the country leaves the victims re-victimized in the social realm after suffering from psychological traumas and physical pains and assaults (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014). The reason for this was blamed on the position of the law which places high onus on the rape victim to provide concrete evidence of forceful penetration before a court of law. The contemporary African society in this way suffers from the culture of rape which had placed every victim far away from taking her case to the police for appropriate sanction to be taken. All these and many more function as “cautionary tales” that act to fuel doubts and disbelief about women’s narratives generally and prevent women from speaking out about their experiences of violence when molested (Larcombe, 2002).

The stigmatization of the rape victims also account for more reasons why rape incidences are mostly silenced by victims and their family members who consider the impact of such reports on their daughter and family reputation. The primary debates in relation to media and sexual abuse center on questions of moral panic and debates about the ways in which the act is or is not misrepresented and the causes of that misrepresentation. As some authors argue that feminists and survivor-activists have contributed to a “witch-hunt” atmosphere, others are of the opinion that this agenda has been appropriated and depoliticized by media sources that have displaced the critique of power within the family onto the figure of the stranger pedophile (Furedi, 2013; Jewkes & Wykes, 2012).

Often times, re-victimization of victims of rape or sexual assault often comes in the form of victim blaming. Victim blaming according to Eigenberg and Garland refers to the tendency to hold the victims of sexual abuse or assault responsible for the assault (Eigenberg & Garland, 2008). Victim blaming while present in practically every crime – people can be blamed for not locking their house doors when they get robbed- but is more rampant when evaluating or judging sexual assaults (Bieneck & Krahe, 2010). Why victims are blamed for assaults against them requires more research as there is no consensus on the predictors of victim blaming (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Studies on victim blaming agree on the fact that victims of acquaintance rape are more likely to be blamed than victims of stranger rape (Bieneck & Krahe, 2011; Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; Moor, 2010). With regards to the role the media play in victim blaming, studies have shown that the portrayal by the media can in fact influence audience perception and affect how they react to events around them. Studies by Gilens showed that media portrayal of blacks as “poor Americans” further reinforces stereotypical perceptions concerning black Americans, even when such portrayals are not accurate (Gilens, 1996). Same thing applies to victim blaming, Anastasio and Costa in their study on victim blaming found that failure to personalize the victim of a crime might communicate that the victim does not deserve attention or is someone at fault (Anastasio & Costa, 2004).

This study, while not directly focused on the role of the media in victim blaming or the re-victimization of the victims, seeks to understand how the new media (specifically, social media) can help in controlling or mediating the national discourse around rape and sexual assault in Nigeria.

NEW MEDIA AND RAPE DISCOURSE

Literature had revealed that several media scholars have affirmed that the advent of social media in the 21st century had changed the nature of life of virtually every facet of the society (Nwabueze and Ikegbunam, 2016) as people now shift their activities online given the enamors advantage of that (Agba, 2001). Moreover, the changing nature of sexual violence due to the rise of online technologies is an emerging area of scholarship. Debates center on whether Internet culture is particularly misogynist or reflects, and makes more visible, the high levels of sexual abuse and violence confronted by women and girls more broadly (Yamawaki, Darby & Queiroz, 2007). Social media platforms have been believed to control enormous power and instrument of social change in the society. Cottle supports this assertion in his study on the media and Arab uprising of 2011, the findings of his study showed that social media indeed played a significant role in rallying people together and was very instrumental in the success of the revolution across the Arab world during this period (Cottle, 2011). Based on these studies, the researchers therefore posit that social media can be used to champion strong public agitation against rape incidences in Nigeria. In all these things, the social media have a better advantage in that the victim can comfortably disseminate her experiences online without exposing her identity. Doing this may not help the security agencies to get the perpetrator of the act but it may help others who had not had such experiences to relate to and/or avoid similar experiences. How well social media have been used in curbing or increasing the rate of rape in Nigeria is the gap this study is set to fill. If it has been that the mainstream media had encouraged it through re-victimization as argued by Nwabueze and Oduah, can the social media play some significant role in managing the ugly situation? This cannot be ascertained without an empirical study of this nature conducted in this part of the world (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014).

The #metoo movement that kicked off in 2017 with a single tweet from Alyssa Milano- a Hollywood actress- who asked that anyone that had been sexually assaulted or harassed should respond with “me too”- is perhaps the best example of social media encouraging national and international discourse on rape culture. That single tweet by Milano started perhaps the greatest social justice movement of post 2010. The #metoo movement is notable for the fact that it brought to the forefront an issue that has been discussed well, but discussed in hush tones. Victims prior to the #metoo era often times did not tell their stories, perpetrators of rape crimes seemed almost untouchable. The

#metoo movement also helped birth the #Believeher movement which sought to make it easier for women to report rape and encouraged the public to believe women when they make a complaint. Since 2017, some of the most powerful men in Hollywood have been called out and some of them were prosecuted. Most of the identified perpetrators lost their positions and were shamed out of the limelight.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

This study seeks to find out the following:

1. Why rape victims choose to share their stories online and the feedback they receive on and offline.
2. The response of social media users to reports on rape
3. How social media have impacted the national discourse about rape in Nigeria.

THE METHOD OF STUDY

This study adopts a mixed research method. It examines available social media content on rape and how the online community reacts to incidences of rape. To achieve the research objectives, this study has made use of Twitter data mapping, content analysis and in-depth interviews.

To carry out Twitter data mapping, the researchers made use of NodeXL basic which allowed us to collect Twitter data, see the connections between Twitter users and their interactions on certain issues. Since this study focused on the conversations surrounding rape and sexual harassment, the following hashtags/keywords were used as our search criteria:

1. Rape in Nigeria
2. #Arewametoo
3. Consent in Nigeria
4. Sexual violence
5. Sexual harassment in Nigeria

The reason for using these search terms was because the researchers wanted only tweets relating specifically to Nigeria and that is why the more popular #metoo was not used, because it was difficult to streamline down to Nigeria. After collecting this data, the software presented it in a graph. The graph shows how twitter users interacted on the subject matter at a specific period and it also shows who the major influencers on this issue were as at the time of collecting data. Because of space, the researchers opted to only show the graph showing the highest number of interactions over a period of one month on the two top search terms.

To find out the response of Nigerians to incidences of rape, content analysis of the comments sections of rape reports on Instagram were analyzed. The most popular news blogs on Instagram (Nigeria) are; Instablog9ja, Yabaleft and Naijainfo. Therefore, the researchers chose a period of 1 year (June 2018-May 2019) and collected all news that is related to rape or sexual harassment from these blogs. During the period under review, a total of 243 posts related to rape or sexual harassment were shared on these pages and a total of 311,234 thousand comments were posted in response to these posts. These comments were analyzed to find out the response and general attitude of Nigerians to reports of rape against women and girls. The table below shows the coding of the comments based on the identified themes in the analyzed comments:

Primary Theme	Sub-theme
Rationalizing the act of rape	Indecent dressing, going out at night, going out without a male escort, talking rudely, going clubbing alone, going to a guy's house, sleeping over at a guy's house, flirting with a guy, not locking your doors at night, living alone.
Indifference to the act of rape	We have more pressing issues to discuss, can we hear from the second party, facts only
Support for rape	Husband cannot rape his wife, a guy playfully touching you is not rape, rape is bad, but,
Against rape	Rapist should be killed, rapists should be castrated, only in Nigeria, why women do not speak up
Calling for authorities to step in	Nigerian police force should look into this, laws need to be passed that punishes rape severely

The table above was developed from the 311,234 rape related comments on Instagram and then they were categorized into 4 broad themes- Rationalization, indifference, support and call for help. These themes were looked out for throughout the comments and the frequency of their occurrence was noted down and presented in order to be able to ascertain the general sentiments of Nigerians on social media to reports of rape. The comments were curated using the 4kstagram application which allows users collect pictures and comments using hashtags.

Out of the 243 posts related to rape or sexual harassment, 52 were against children rape (below the age of 18) while the remaining ones were against university students and adults. In 185 out of the 243 identified cases; the perpetrators were identified while they were not in the remaining cases. The table below shows the breakdown.

Item	Frequency	No of comments
Reported rape against children	52	125,235
Reported rape or sexual assault against adults (and university students)	191	185,999
Rape cases where the perpetrators were identified	185	202,003
Rape cases where the perpetrators were not identified	58	109,231

Finally, in-depth interviews were conducted with victims of rape to find out how social media have impacted their lives and whether social media make it easier to come forward or more difficult. Also the researchers sort to find out how telling their stories on social media has helped them heal or move on from the trauma. The sampling strategy adopted was the snowball sampling method. Getting victims of sexual assault to come forward is challenging and hence the reason for adopting the snowball approach. The interviews were conducted through WhatsApp, the questions were sent to the first respondent (referred to as Champ 1) who responded to each of the questions via WhatsApp voice notes. Champ 1 also referred the researchers to other survivors of rape who agreed to be interviewed through WhatsApp messaging (mostly voice notes). The interviews were transcribed and then analyzed. 17 rape survivors were interviewed.

PRESENTATION OF DATA AND ANALYSIS

To achieve these objectives, the researchers opted to make use of Social Networking Analysis (SNA). SNA is becoming a popular means of accessing and analyzing online sentiments and identifying influencers that push the conversation on certain issues. There are numerous tools used to analyze social networks, but for this study, the researchers have made use of NodeXL basic. This tool allows users to collect Twitter and Facebook data and present this data in a graph form (directed, undirected and mixed) to allow for easy understanding of the magnitude of the interactions taking place concerning certain issues and also identify the key players and influencers in pushing or directing the discourse.

Twitter data was analyzed because Twitter is one of the most popular social networks in Nigeria and it is by far the most popular for mobilizing people to take action and to discuss important issues in Nigeria.

Sharing and the feedback: why share and how does the family respond?

To ascertain whether or not rape incidents are being shared online (Twitter) and the frequency of such stories, a deep search of Twitter using NodeXL was carried out. This search involved making use of the following keywords or hashtags; 'rape in Nigeria', 'consent in Nigeria', '#Arewameto', 'sexual harassment in Nigeria' and 'Sexual violence'. The results showed that while a lot of discussions were being had on social media, not a lot of people were discussing their experiences online. Majority of the discussions were being pushed by other people or groups.

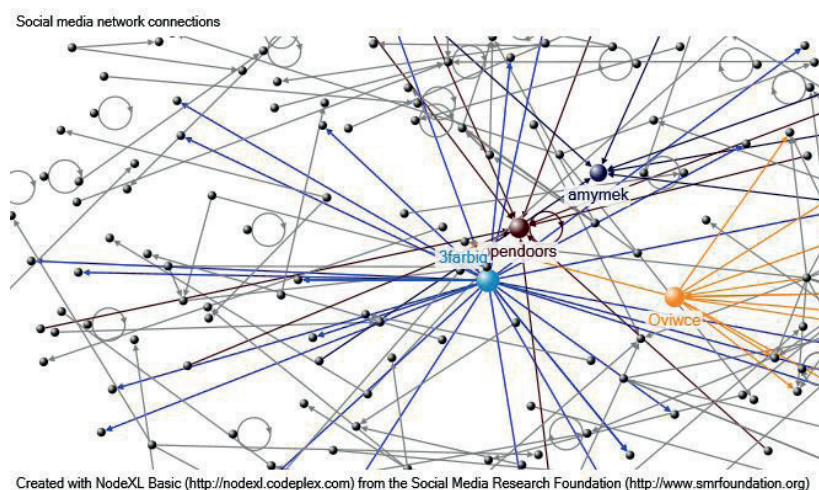


Fig 1: Rape in Nigeria

Figure 1 above shows sparse discussions with the key words 'rape in Nigeria' included. The researchers opted to make use of 'rape in Nigeria' as against using just 'rape' to get tweets from or related to Nigeria. The figure above shows that there are 4 major influencers – people that get a lot of retweets or a lot of followers on Twitter. The influencers are Opendoors, amymek, amymek and oviwce. On closer inspection of these users, it was found out that only Oviwce is actually an active advocate for women's right and emancipation. The remaining 'Tweeters' are not even based in Nigeria and do not regularly tweet about rape or women's right in the country.

#Arewameto is a Nigerian version of the global #metoo movement that swept through America and parts of Europe in 2018. So it was the assumption of the researchers that this will be one of the most popular hashtags that sexual

harassment/rape victims will use to share their stories. Therefore, a deep search using NodeXL was carried out using #Arewametoo as the hashtag and below is the graph that resulted from the query.

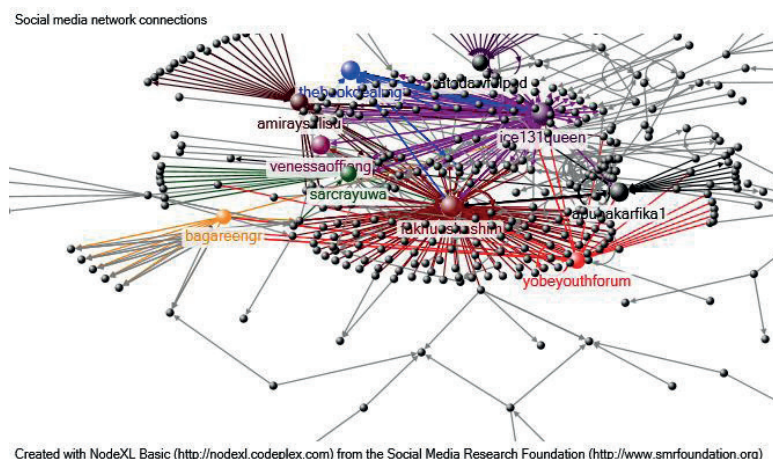


Fig2: #Arewametoo Twitter graph showing interactions using the hashtag

From the graph, it can be deduced that a lot more discussions took place using the arewametoo hashtag. Six (6) major influencers were identified using this arewametoo hashtag and they are; Vanessaoffiong, jishaq1, amiraysalisu, ice131queen, mr_frank, Fakhuushashia, and Yobeyouthforum. Amongst the tweets shared or sent out by these influencers or users, some included videos of rape victims or victims of sexual abuse speaking out against their victimizers or crying out for help. This showed that some victims of sexual violence actually speak up.

When asked about who narrates the rape experience or abuse events, the table below shows the respondents responses

Table 1: Narrators of sexual abuse

Narrator	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Victim	26	13.1	13.1
relatives of the victim	38	19.1	32.2
police/security agencies	42	21.1	53.3
NGOs	66	33.2	86.4
government ministry/Judiciary	15	7.5	94.0
other	12	6.0	100.0
Total	199	100.0	

SOURCE: AUTHORS (2019)

From the table above, it can be seen that NGOs are the primary mobiliser and narrators of rape stories. They are the ones that try to create awareness about rape and not the victims. Although a decent number of victims (13.1%) also try to bring attention to the horrors of sexual harassment and rape by telling their stories. But from the findings of this study, it is clear that NGOs and not the victims are the primary narrators when it comes to rape and sexual abuse. This further supports the findings of the social network analysis (Twitter) which found out that very few victims of sexual abuse and rape actually tell their stories publicly (on social media).

This study also sought the opinions of victims of rape on how they share their stories and why. Interviews were conducted with a popular blogger in Nigeria who had gone viral for sharing her rape story from childhood. Apart from being a rape survivor, she is also a champion for women’s rights and unequivocally in support of harsher punishments for rapists. However, she was interviewed in her capacity as a blogger who has had the opportunity to interact with a lot of rape survivors and also as the owner of a platform where rape victims can share their stories under the hashtag #haveyosae

To protect her anonymity, she would be referred to in this article as Respondent 1. When asked when she was first raped and who she first reported, she responded by stating:

I was first raped at the age of 5 and I told my mum about it. I was raped by a close family member and reported to my parents who told me to keep quiet about the incident, that the case will be settled within the family...it was not until 2016, when I first published the rape incident on social media. I felt social media was a place where I could name and shame my oppressors without any fears. (August, 6, 2019 [WhatsApp]).

Of the 17 people interviewed, 12 confirmed they were raped or sexually molested before the age of 12 and in all the cases, nothing was done to the perpetrators because they were close friends to the family or even family members. To move beyond the actions, the victims all alluded to the fact that they all chose to go to boarding houses or move to

relatives houses instead of being close to their rapists or molesters.

When asked why they chose to tell their stories, most times years after the incident took place, Respondent 1 (August, 6, 2019 [WhatsApp]) explained that,

I was just 5 when I was raped by an uncle, I did not even fully understand what had happened and it was not until I got older that I began to understand the damage the incident had caused. The man that raped me threatened to kill me if I told anyone, I was just 5 and of course I believed him. So I did not bother tell anybody. I could not trust anyone, and I had grown to hate my parents for protecting my rapist. I left home when I was 15 and in 2016, I felt it was time to tell my story. I just wasn't raped when I was 5, I was also raped by my mum's friend (who was a police officer at the time) and a cousin when I was 12. And my parents did nothing! I decided to tell my story and show how far I had gone in the healing process, so other girls going currently going through this pain will understand that there is yet hope and that things can still change. Although, we live in a country where the police deals with these issues as a sort of family matter that should be settled within the family, but by calling out the names of my victims on social media, I felt like I have taken back my dignity and respect. I felt by telling my story, I might inspire other victims to speak up and tell theirs and hopefully will lead to a country where rapists can no longer hide.

Respondent 5 (August, 22, 2019 [WhatsApp]) in here response stated that:

In my case, I was raped by a church member when I was 12, I told my mum about it, who in turn reported to the head pastor of the church. The pastor told my mum point blank that I was the cause, that I had a marine spirit that needs to be destroyed. That the spirit operates by seducing strong men of God in order to destroy the house of God. My mum, in her naivety believed him and even offered to bring me to church for deliverance. On the day she wanted to take me to church, I shouted and cried until my dad told her to leave me alone. But since that time, she looked at me like I was possessed. At age 16, immediately after completing my SS3, I left home and went to live with a friend in Lagos, since I no longer felt welcomed at home. I regretted informing my mum about the rape and sometimes think that maybe if I hadn't told her, things might have been different for me. In 2018, I told my boyfriend what happened and he decided to anonymously share it on social media, the feedback and support I received from social media pages encouraged me and I decided to reveal my identity in a post on social media that quickly went viral. My mum has since apologized but my molester is still very prominent and I just fear what he is doing to other ladies, in the name of being their spiritual father.

The general idea from the interview of the 17 respondents was that they mostly felt that by exposing the actions of rapist or by naming and shaming rapist and sexual molesters, they are empowering themselves and more importantly they are showing other victims that they are not alone in their struggle.

To summarize, it is clear that a lot of rape incidences go unreported, either because they know they would not be believed, or because of being threatened by the perpetrators. When the victims eventually summon courage to report to family, a lot of people prefer to 'handle' the problem within the family, often times blaming the victim for the actions.

RESPONSES OF SOCIAL MEDIA USERS TO INCIDENCES OF RAPE REPORTED ONLINE

To find out the response of Nigerians to incidences of rape, content analysis of comments sections of rape reports on Instagram were analyzed. A total of 311,234 thousand comments were posted during the period under review. These comments were analyzed to find out the response and general attitude of Nigerians to reports of rape against women and girls. The table below shows the frequency of perceptions among social media users based on predetermined themes.

Table 2: Perception of social media users about rape

Primary Theme	Frequency	Percentage frequency (%)
Rationalising the act of rape	50,215	16.13
Indifference to the act of rape	32,235	10.4
Support for rape	15,025	4.83
Against rape	152,024	48.8
Calling for authorities to step in	61,735	19.84
TOTAL	311,234	100

From the table above, it is clear that the majority of social media users are against rape or calling for authorities to step in. The findings show that when the perpetrator is not known or named, people generally tag the Nigerian police force, the PRO of the police, the president, vice-president or other notable Nigerians. The general sentiment is that the police should not allow such actions to go unpunished and that the perpetrators should be brought to book.

Although 16.13% might seem like a low figure, but considering the population of Nigeria and the prevalence of rape in the country, as well as the consequences of rape to the victims, there is no gainsaying the fact that, it is quite alarming, that over 16% of social media users (mostly youths) think there is an excuse to rape anyone.

The findings show that in situations where the victim is a child (i.e. below 18), comments more and mostly condemned the action and called for the relevant authorities to step in. Although some comments bemoaned the situation in Nigeria,

“where no one is safe and the authority turns a blind eye”. Very few comments blamed the parents for negligence. However, the general sentiment was that of outrage against the perpetrators and comments like, “why is he still breathing?” (Instagram user 2, September 15, 2019 [Instagram]) “I don’t support jungle justice, but in this case, I make an exception” (Instagram user 3, September 15, 2019 [Instagram]), “Until one person is being picked up, set as a scapegoat by firing squad or death by hanging this nonsense will not stop” (Instagram user 4, September 15, 2019 [Instagram]) etc. were very rampant. In this situations, disbelief was also rampant and people thankful for the family they come from were sentiments that generally flooded the comments section. Some examples of these comments include; “father raping his own daughter???? What kind of thing is that, I just thank God for my family” (Instagram user 1, “I don’t believe a father will do this to his own child, maybe he is not the real father”, “are these men cursed? What is with these little kids?” (Instagram user 6, September 15, 2019 [Instagram])

When the victim is above 18, the comments generally made excuses for the rapists. Social media users asked why ladies go out alone at night, why did they dress the way they did etc. The comment below is typical of the comments to these kinds of rape reports which typically blame the victims:

“When a hardworking, young man with prospects asks you out, you say no, because he is not driving a Benz, you run after yahoo boys and so called fine boys. Well, this is the result, slay mamas can do anything for money”

“Don’t think you can change anybody, the signs were there before you accepted to go out with him, but money and Benz will not make you see road. Now he has ‘panelbeated’ your face and raped you, what do you now want us to do for you?”

“Stop going out at night, you will not hear word, no see yasef” (Instagram user 8, September 17, 2018 [Instagram])

“Girls will be dressing provocatively at night, exposing themselves anyhow and think men no go touch? Body no be firewood joor” (Instagram user 9, December 15, 2018 [Instagram])

All these comments show a total disregard for the pain the victim is going through and seem to be an endorsement of the rape culture prevalent in Nigeria. Excuses are made and the victims are usually blamed for ‘encouraging’ the rapists.

Some comments even show compassion for the accused, one Instagram comment reads, “Why do I feel so sorry for this young man? Why do I feel he just allowed the devil to cheat on him at a very vital stage of life! Kaaaaaiii! God pls intervene” (Instagram user 7, August 28, 2019 [Instagram])

The findings also showed that, when the identities of the perpetrators are known, then the comments usually call for the punishment of the rapists, some call for jungle justice, but there is usually strong condemnation of the action. For instance, if the news is that father rapes daughter, or man rapes neighbor’s daughter or pastor caught defiling a young girl, then the response is usually very harsh and against the accused rapist. However, when the perpetrator is unknown, then the news is usually taken with some level of skepticism, as comments usually allude to the fact that the victim might be trying to frame an innocent person or that maybe they should hear from the alleged rapist before passing a judgment. Posts that says, “a girl raped in hostel by unknown assailant”, “a girl says she was raped on her way home”, “a university student claims she was raped at a friend’s party”, are mostly taken with a pinch of salt. Skepticism, doubt and some victim blaming are usually on full display in the comments section of such stories. Comments like, “wetin you sef dey find for late night party” (Meaning = what were you looking for late at night?), “he raped you and nobody in your entire compound heard you shout”, “a full grown woman is raped, and she could not even scream out” etc.

Victim blaming or even victim shaming is one of the most prominent responses on social media; especially the suspected rapist is a revered member of the society. A very recent example is the case of the wife of a popular musician in Nigeria, who claimed in an interview that a Senior Pastor of one of the biggest new generation Pentecostal churches in the country raped her when she was 17 years old. Celebrities came out in support of the victim, but an analysis of comments on social media, showed that most social media users that commented on the story felt the lady was just trying to cash in on the fame of the pastor to make some money. Other comments asked why she waited for close to 20 years before making the allegations. Some comments asked that, “if it was not this fine, handsome rich man that raped her, would she have spoken out”.

The general sentiment the researchers got from analyzing these comments was that social media users generally believe most women that allege rape against a prominent personality are only doing it to make money or embarrass the person or even become more famous by coat-tailing on the person’s name or brand.

This finding supports the work of Wellman, Reddington and Rose who in their study on social media coverage of teen sexual assaults, found out that victim blaming was the most prominent theme observed in the cases analyzed in their study (Wellman et al, 2017). They found out that the majority of social media users blamed the victim’s behavior – drunkenness, promiscuity – for the assault.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND RAPE DISCOURSE IN NIGERIA

Research shows that the media can and have influenced national and international discourse on rape and sexual harassment. The #metoo movement in the United States of America is a case in point, the #Arewametoo movement in Nigeria – an offshoot of the #metoo movement- is another example of how social media have helped in calling attention to issues of rape and sexual harassment.

A study by Nwabueze and Oduah on media re-victimization of rape victims, using 3 major Nigerian newspapers as their case study, showed that in one year (between June 2013 and May 2014), 57 rape cases combined were reported in these newspapers (Nwabueze & Oduah, 2014). While this shows that attention was being given to issues of rape, their findings when looked at in context of the prevalence of rape in Nigeria show that only a small fraction of rape are reported in the newspapers.

In this study which looks at 3 major Nigerian blogs on Instagram alone (Instablog9ja, Yabaleft and Naijainfo), a total of 243 posts related to rape and sexual harassment were identified. This is a sharp increment, representing a 326% increment over that period. It is clear from the results that the media (especially social media) are reporting more on rape and sexual assault, but does this increase in news reporting on the subject of rape and sexual assault lead to more discussions of the issue of rape and how to prevent and punish it?

The results from the interviews conducted with survivors of rape showed that victims of rape are more willing to share their story on social media, because they can tell the full story. Respondent 3 succinctly explains why she feels telling her story and the increased attention rape stories are getting on social media and even on traditional media helps in encouraging national discourse on the matter;

I was raped about 5 years ago and I was just 17 years old...my lesson teacher was the person that raped me. Social media was not as popular then as it is now, we did not have these many influencer platforms to share our stories, so it was left to the major print and media houses to share our stories. I remember reading the rape report and thinking to myself, but this people are not saying the whole story, with the way the story was written, it would appear I was asking for it...I can't remember now, but the reporter said girls should not leave their houses to go to any man's house alone. But he was my lesson teacher! I felt betrayed and since then never shared my experience again, until when (name redacted) shared hers online and it gave me strength to re-share my experience.

Since then I have had a lot of opportunities to interact with a lot of young girls going through what I went through and through social media, a lot of local and International NGOs have reached out to me to support my initiative to educate young girls on reading the signs and what to do when sexually harassed or raped. (August, 15, 2019 [WhatsApp]).

The general consensus amongst those interviewed was that social media have helped shed light on the issue of rape and brought it to the forefront of national discourse. Some of the respondents said they did not know rape was so rampant, especially against young children until they started seeing the stories on social media.

Offender blaming while present in a lot of cases involving obviously vulnerable people (mostly children, house maids, mentally challenged amongst others), victim blaming was more rampant among adult women who claimed to have been sexually molested by a close friend, trusted confidant, spiritual leader and so on. This has led to heated debates on social media with opposing views trying their best to get their points across.

A recent case in point is the rape case against Pastor Biodun Fatoyinbo, a prominent pastor that was accused of rape by a wife of celebrity in Nigeria. This case divided the nation and got a lot of people talking. The first lady of Nigeria waded into the case, asking for the Inspector General of Police to take action and not allow it be swept under the carpet, a lot of Nigerian celebrities took a public stand against the pastor, with the hash tag #IstandwithBusola trending on Twitter. However, it was not long after, that the push backs began with supports of the pastor also using the hash tag #IstandwithpastorB which also trended. The case showed how social media helped in encouraging discourse around rape and abuse by men in positions of power.

From the foregoing, it is clear that social media in some way is helping to bring much needed attention to rape and sexual harassment in Nigeria, but how these stories are framed and whether they affect government policies and actions is worthy of further studies. Social media while being a powerful tool to promote a course or challenge a status quo, it is a tool that can be too easily hijacked for propaganda purposes. The 'influencers' are not many and they are the ones with the social media clout and might to influence perceptions on a large scale, and if not properly managed, these influencers can be easily bought or paid off in order to promote a certain perspective. It is against this background that the researchers suggest for further studies, a critical look at the role of social media influencers in promoting or destroying the status quo and how they can be properly managed.

CONCLUSION

Social media has become quite ubiquitous in our everyday lives. So it is not surprising that there is an overload of information regarding serious issues in society, such as rape, gender inequalities, racism, sexism etc. The anonymity the internet provides has also made it possible for survivors of rape and sexual assault to tell their stories without fear of exposure (if they do not want to) through blogs and support pages on social media. Therefore, in the last few years, a lot of women have come out to share their stories and encourage other women to keep strong and if possible, name and shame their oppressors.

This study therefore sought to find out why rape survivors choose to share their stories online and the responses they get. It further sought to understand from the perspective of the survivors, how social media is influencing rape discourse in Nigeria. While the results are not necessarily generalizable because of the limited sample size, the findings offer significant understanding into the role of social media in rape discourse in Nigeria and would be a spring board for further studies into the phenomenon.

The results show that a lot of discussions around rape is being shared and had on social media and that the survivors of rape and sexual harassment share their stories to empower themselves and encourage other people to come out of the shells and tell theirs too. The majority of respondents interviewed alluded to the fact that sharing their stories online helped them on their healing journey and further strengthened their resolve to stand against rape and sexual harassment. The findings also show that while victims of rape get a lot of support online, there are still a lot of victim-blaming happening on social media that might deter other victims from coming forward to seek justice and heal.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

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