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**INDICATORS OF ONLINE CHILD SEXUAL AND EXPLOITATION:
THE PERSPECTIVE OF CHILD PROTECTION OFFICERS IN THE
GAMBIA
(CASE STUDY: SEREKUNDA TOURISM DEVELOPMENT AREAS)**

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Abstract.

The digital technology has positively transformed the life and living conditions of many people around the globe. However, studies have revealed some negative socio-economic, political, cultural; and environmental impacts. This case study was conducted to interrogate online child sexual abuse and exploitation in The Gambia focusing on the motivating factors, techniques, negative impacts, victims and perpetrators support services, preventive strategies; and institutional collaboration. Grounded on the findings the indicators of online child sexual entail sexy vocabulary, unusual sexy actions, romantic behaviours, regular self-isolation, attitudinal change, dress style, regular watching of pornographic materials, always talking on the phone and in secret; and poor academic performance.

Key words: online, indicators child, abuse, exploitation, perpetrators, tourism



لقد غيرت التكنولوجيا الرقمية بشكل إيجابي حياة العديد من الناس وظروفهم المعيشية حول العالم. ومع ذلك ، كشفت الدراسات عن بعض السلبيات الاجتماعية والاقتصادية والسياسية والثقافية ؛ والآثار البيئية. أجريت دراسة الحالة هذه للتحقيق في الاعتداء الجنسي على الأطفال واستغلالهم عبر الإنترنت في غامبيا مع التركيز على العوامل المحفزة والتقنيات والآثار السلبية وخدمات دعم الضحايا والجناة والاستراتيجيات الوقائية ؛ والتعاون المؤسسي. تستند إلى نتائج مؤشرات ممارسة الجنس مع الأطفال عبر الإنترنت والتي تنطوي على مفردات مثيرة ، وأفعال مثيرة غير عادية ، وسلوكيات رومانسية ، وعزل ذاتي منتظم ، وتغيير في المواقف وأسلوب لباس ، ومشاهدة منتظمة للمواد الإباحية ، والتحدث دائماً على الهاتف وفي الخفاء ؛ وضعف الأداء الأكاديمي .

الكلمات المفتاحية: الانترنت ، مؤشرات الطفل ، سوء المعاملة ، الاستغلال ، الجناة ، السياحة

Introduction

Over the years, the world has witnessed a massive revolution in all aspects of life and society due to the unprecedented growth of the digital technology (Martin Hilbert, 2020). With the internet, communication has not only become fast but easy especially with the accessible and affordable mobile and smartphones, computer devices, social media; and messaging applications. Thus, it has resulted to more than 4.5 billion people being connected to the cyber world 1 in 3 of whom are children and unfortunately hardly under the supervision of any responsible adult (Bracket Foundation, n.d.). Although the virtual world has positively impacted all walks of life, it has a dark side that equally demands global recognition and immediate actions to save lives and businesses (Pietro Ferrara, 2021) and (Michael Chertoff, 2015).

With the remote world, the sexual abuse of children has not only been made easy, but has substantially increased as it has become a comfortable and affordable platform for perpetrators of child abuse and exploitation to establish relationship for subsequent offline meetings and engagement in sexual activities (Choi, Wong, & Fong, 2018). The online contacts have subsequently resulted in offenders physically meeting victims and sexually abused them, (Senker, Scott, & Wainwright, 2020).

Therefore, the cyber world is increasingly becoming a dangerous platform for children and teenagers particularly those whose profiles are often on the net (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). According to the National Centre for Missing and Exploited children, from 2019 to 2020, it has witnessed a 106 per cent increment in reports of online sexual exploitation while the Watch Foundation registered 77 per cent increase in child self-generated sexual materials (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021).



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Globally, the picture looks disturbing as per the number of people who had experienced at least one online sexual abuse during childhood as per disaggregated data sub-regionally: Middle East and North Africa 44%, Western Europe 65%, Eastern Europe and Commonwealth Independent States 44%, East Asia 44%, Southeast Asia 52%, Australasia 52%, South Asia 50%, Southern Africa 57%, Central Africa 31%, Latin America 49%, Central America 59%; and North America 71%(Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019), (Maestral, 2021) and (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021).

In light of these alarming online sexual abuse and exploitation meted on innocent children, academics, parents; and politicians has developed serious interest and commitment in ensuring that children are safe online since the digital technology has become an integral part of people's life and living(Rogers, Wczasek, & Davies, 2011). Therefore, building a safer virtual world especially for the vulnerable communities including the children has become a global agenda requiring both local and international pragmatic solutions(UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2011).

In spite of this unbelievable maltreatment of our beloved children, the exact number of survivors and conditions is not scientifically well researched and documented; nevertheless what is concrete is they are in millions(Ali, Haykal, & Youssef, 2021). This lack of scholarly documentation, especially in the third world including The Gambia, beyond reasonable doubts is a huge challenge to all. Therefore, this research was meant to address this academic vacuum.

Aims and Methodology

AIMS

The primordial objective of this study was to interrogate the present scale and degree of the causes of online child sexual abuse in The Gambia focusing on the Tourism Development Areas (TDA) and surrounding communities, share knowledge to spark and inspire a process that will galvanise quick response from all in the battle against the menace. The Gambia is a major destination in Africa with hundreds of thousands of visitors round the year.



Methodology

The qualitative approach was adopted to explore twenty nine child protection officers' views with regard to online child sexual abuse in The Gambia, mainly focusing on the causes, techniques of recruitment, the impacts, government and its development partners' efforts toward its eradication, strategies to eliminate it; challenges and opportunities. This approach was adopted in response to the need to generate rich and original descriptions of the respondents' views and professionals experiences in anticipation that one can discern what is exactly happening in the tourism development areas vis-à-vis online child sexual abuse and what can be done to eradicate it. The study was informed by a case study and twenty nine (29) child protection officers who are directly involved in handling matters associated with child abuse in the country were in-depth interviewed. The study lasted for six months and thematically covered the motivating factors, techniques, impacts, support services, preventive strategies; and institutional collaboration.

DISCUSSIONS

Indicators of Online Child Sexual Abuse and Exploitation

Informants in ruminating the indicators of online child sexual abuse and exploitation, they variedly highlighted the followings: sexy vocabulary, unusual sexy actions, romantic behaviours, regular self-isolation, attitudinal change, dress style, regular watching of pornographic materials, always talking on the phone and in secret; and poor academic performance as encapsulated in the underneath table.

Identified indicators	Frequency	%
Sexy vocabulary	19	7.0
Unusual sexy actions	32	12.0
Romantic behaviours	47	17.0
Regular self-isolation	23	8.3
Attitudinal change	17	6.2
Dress style	29	11.0
Regular watching of pornographic materials	43	16.0
Talking always on phone and in secret	31	11.2
Poor academic performance	35	13.0
Total responses	276	100.00



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In view of the above and the existing literature reviews, it appears there is a very thin line between offline abuse indicators and that of online ones substantiating (UNICEF, 2020), at the moment there is no explicit boundary between online and offline commercial sexual exploitation of children, and because of this, it is not always easy or feasible to clearly separate the two and associated critical symptoms and issues such as children at risk, impacts, causes; and prevention strategies.

In fighting against a menace it is critical that it is well comprehended either through unambiguous definitions or its fundamental qualities. Child and child sexual abuse being fluid concepts informants felt being conscious of sexy vocabulary, unusual sexy actions and romantic behaviours can be instrumental in the war against the menace as reiterated: “.....if you see a child behave in this way or if you see them using these kind of words ‘he is good muscle’ be suspicious that somebody somewhere isluring them into illicit acts,” commented a male informant. This observation is supported by (Franziska Knolle & Vallotton, 2017) revelation, although there are no significant differences in term of language sophistication development between abused and non-abused children, abused children applied twice as many grammatical negations, a strong indicator of the development of a negativity bias; possibly due to the adaption to their bad experiences. Similarly (Audette Sylvestre & Res, 2015)found, children who have experienced abuse, experience delay language skills development compare to those who have not suffered any abuse.

According to some informants sexually abused children are highly likely to be engaged in alcohol and drug abuse: “.....it is very important we look at the use of drugs at that tender age to relief stress and also being too much active at night to be awake for long time free talk,” asserted another female informant. This aligned with (Emily A. Greenfield, 2011), discovery, children experiencing sleep disorder is a stronger indicator of being subjected to abuse including sexual one. Similarly (Wonjeong Chae, 2021) found, children who experienced and/or experiencing abuse at present, to manifest huge degree of poorer sleep quality due to the traumatic experiences which subsequently led to inadequate psychological development. Children who were subjected to emotional, physical; and sexual abuse are more often than not associated with the abuse of drugs and alcohol as a coping mechanism, (Lee Hogarth, 2018)revealed.

Similarly, children being addressed romantically all of the time is some sort of testimony of experiencing some forms of sexual relationship: “.....when you



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suddenly start seeing the child romantically either in the way she walks or sits.....know that this one is dealing with people above her age and the game of luring children into sexual activities..... children don't act out of the blue," asserted a female informant. This claimed concurs with (Sharron J. Lennon, 2017) findings, associate the wearing of sexy dress to violence including sexual coercion, sexual harassment, sexual assault, unwelcome groping, touching and grabbing and furthermore, sexy dress that shows the body is linked to self-objectification.

Similarly, regular self-isolation, attitudinal change, sexy dress style, regular watching of pornographic materials, always talking on the phone and in secret are some fundamental indicators of being lured into sexual activities and parents and caregivers must be on their toes to salvage their children. ".....most of the time you will see them when communicating they will isolate themselves with frequent smiles those are indicators that she is doing something wrong," implored a female informant. This concurs with (Stanley, 2001), most children who are being sexual abused exhibit symptoms like stress in the manner of avoidance and withdrawal. According to another informant all of a sudden change of mood is a demonstration of abuse as put: "..... as a mother sometimes your child is using the phone all of a sudden if you notice in attitudinal changes.....she is picking something which is not good.....," asserted a male informant. I must add: "if you see sharp dropped in academic performance because she cannot concentrate on books but rather on her phone, be alert she is being entertained non-academically, parents must be on the watch," a female informant concluded. This is identical with (Stanley, 2001) findings, children once abused online they become less sensitive to online child sexual abuse materials, in addition to having difficulties in maintaining relationship, s/he starts to encounter some problems in communicating well due to aggressive attitudes. Children experiencing online sexual abuse exhibit different symptoms such as being emotionally charged most of the time, rage, extreme tense, fearful; and self-blaming (Ali et al., 2021).

In the same vein, dressing half naked and frequently watching pornographic materials are critical indicators of cyber sexual abuse and deserves immediate actions as put by some informants: ".....suddenly you start seeing the child dressing day in day out half naked or so, saying I don't like African dresses I like European know you should act as parent," implored a male informant. ".....endless watching of pornographic materials to me is the biggest indicator of online sexual abuse and no need to question a child for more facts or the truth just act there and then to save her free from perpetrators' tentacles," emphasised a female informant.



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This is supported by (Stanley, 2001) findings, children trapped in online sexual abuse are fond of watching pornographic materials for long time and dangerous fictional and documentary violence on the internet and also like hate propaganda, drugs and weaponry vedios; and offensive music.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the indicators of online child sexual entail sexy vocabulary, unusual sexy actions, romantic behaviours, regular self-isolation, attitudinal change, dress style, regular watching of pornographic materials, always talking on the phone and in secret; and poor academic performance.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

I declare that there is no conflict of interest with respect to the study, authorship and/or publication of the article.

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ETHICS APPROVAL

Ethics approval was not necessary for a small scale study of this nature.

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