Gender-Based Violence following Social Media Acquaintance in Nigeria

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Abstract

In Nigeria, the growth in mobile phone use has provided the opportunity for increased access to the internet, and through this, the social media. The social media in turn offers tremendous communication benefits but also results in some undesirable consequences. One of such is the experience of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). Internet searches using Google Search and Google Scholar in addition to information available to the authors from news media is reported in this study. Five cases were selected for reporting. All cases selected had first contact with their perpetrator(s) on Facebook. The perpetrators were usually men, older than the victims (24-34 years for perpetrators compared with 17-25 years for the victims). The victims experienced physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence from their aggressors. One case resulted in the death of the victim, while two required hospitalization following severe trauma. Three of the victims were raped, while rape was attempted for the other two cases. GBV associated with acquaintances made on social media channels is emerging as a new social problem in Nigeria. Interventions to educate female social media users about this potential danger are urgently necessary. (Afr J Reprod Health 2016; 20[4]: 67-76).

Keywords: Crime Victim; Gender Issues; Internet; Mobile Phones; Social Media; Violence

Résumé

Au Nigéria, la croissance de l'utilisation des téléphones portables a donné l'occasion d'accéder plus facilement à Internet, et par ce biais, les médias sociaux. Les médias sociaux à leur tour offrent d'énormes avantages à la communication, mais entraînent également des conséquences indésirables. Une de telles expériences est la violence sexiste (VS). Les recherches sur Internet à l'aide de la recherche Google et Google Scholar en plus des informations disponibles aux auteurs de médias sont rapportées dans cette étude. Cinq cas ont été sélectionnés pour les rapports. Tous les cas sélectionnés ont eu un premier contact avec leur auteur(s) sur Facebook. Les auteurs étaient généralement des hommes, plus âgés que les victimes (24-34 ans pour les auteurs, contre 17-25 ans pour les victimes). Les victimes ont subi des violences physiques, psychologiques, sexuelles et économiques de la part de leurs agresseurs. Un cas a entraîné la mort de la victime, tandis que deux ont nécessité l'hospitalisation suite à un traumatisme grave. Trois des victimes ont été violées, alors que le viol a été tenté pour les deux autres cas. La VS associée à des connaissances faites sur les média sociaux apparaît comme un nouveau problème social au Nigéria. Des interventions visant à informer les utilisateurs féminins des médias sociaux sur ce danger potentiel sont urgentes. (Afr J Reprod Health 2016; 20[4]: 67-76).

Mots-clés: victime de crime, questions de genre, internet, téléphones portables, média sociaux, violence

Introduction

According to the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, information and communication technology and its applications offer tremendous opportunities for economic and human development1. Telecommunication systems have been shown to improve economic outcomes of individuals and nations2,3. Compared to landlines, mobile phones have the advantage of providing easier access to the internet and short messaging services, thereby enabling better and faster development opportunities4. Over the last two decades, mobile phone use has grown exponentially at unprecedented rates in sub-Saharan Africa (SSA), from 10% in 1999 to 60% in 20084. Mobile cellular subscriptions in Africa reached 63 mobile phones per 100

inhabitants in 2013\textsuperscript{5}. This growth has been fostered by the poor infrastructure for landlines and the huge cost of introducing new infrastructures for such phones. In Nigeria, mobile phone use has increased from 22.6\% in 2006 to 78\% in 2014\textsuperscript{6,7}. This is in sharp contrast with landline use which was only 10\% in 2014\textsuperscript{4}. In 2000, only 0.1\% of the Nigerian population had access to the internet\textsuperscript{1}. However, this increased to 42.7\% by 2014. Eighty-two percent of internet users access the service through their mobile devices\textsuperscript{8}. Thus, the increased access to the internet in the country is attributed to the growth of the mobile telephony systems.

Besides improved access for business purposes, mobile phones have also offered increased access to social media platforms\textsuperscript{9}. These platforms offer a wide range of communication opportunities such as for job recruitment, information dissemination, marketing, research participant solicitation, medical tourism, social activism and other industries\textsuperscript{10-14}.

These social communication channels have helped to reunite old friends, and allowed people to forge new relationships. When new friendships are formed through the social media, people can easily become victims of criminals who hide under the anonymity of the internet to deceive\textsuperscript{15}. Young people in Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa are experiencing a surge in use of social media\textsuperscript{16,17}. A visualization by Facebook in 2010 showed a concentration of users in Nigeria, revealing one of the few hotspots in SSA\textsuperscript{18}. In response to the high social media patronage by young persons, mobile service providers have introduced customized products, ‘social media packages’ directed at this class of mobile phone users.

Though social media offer much promise, they may also have some undesirable consequences. These consequences include: its use in recruitment for terrorist activities; poaching for financial exploitation; victim identification by serial killers; reputation risk/cyber-bullying; addiction and time wasting; and poaching for sexual exploitation\textsuperscript{19-27}. With the growing adoption of social media in Nigeria, these undesirable consequences have also begun to manifest. Although the news media have reported cases of young women who have experienced gender-based violence (GBV) following arranged meetings with persons met online through the social media\textsuperscript{28-30}, there has been limited scientific documentation of how social media interactions have resulted in adverse consequences.

According to the United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights’ Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women, GBV is defined as “a form of discrimination that seriously inhibits women’s ability to enjoy rights and freedoms on a basis of equality with men”\textsuperscript{31}. GBV is one of the most prevalent human rights violation in the world, undermining the health, dignity and autonomy of its victims\textsuperscript{32}. Nigeria has a high prevalence of GBV, with over 25\% of ever-married 15 to 49 year old women having experienced domestic violence according to a nationwide survey\textsuperscript{33}. It is estimated that about two million Nigerian girls experience sexual violence yearly, with only 28\% of such cases being reported to the authorities\textsuperscript{34}. Another study among female adolescents estimated a GBV prevalence of up to 55\% within this age group\textsuperscript{35}. The types of GBV experienced by Nigerian women include physical, psychological, sexual and economic violence\textsuperscript{33,36-39}.

This study describes the types of violence experienced by women following encounters with male acquaintances made through the social media. It highlights an emerging trend of GBV associated with social media relationships in Nigeria.

**Methods**

This paper draws on information retrieved from publications, grey literature and news media articles in Nigeria over the internet. Social Media associated GBV cases were identified following conventional and unconventional search of the internet using Google Search and Google Scholar in February 2016 in addition to information available to the authors from various news media channels. The Boolean searches were done using keywords and phrases such as: Violence, Social Media, Murder, Gender-Based Violence, Violence Against Women, Nigeria and Facebook. The key words were combined in various ways during the searches. The searches and the number of hits are
presented in Table 1.

A case of GBV associated with social media acquaintance was defined as a victim of violence who had first contact with the perpetrator over the social media or who reunited through a social media channel after some time of loss of contact. The searches revealed several records which were filtered through painstakingly by reading the titles of the papers and selecting for further review those that were related to the topic. Three published papers were identified during the process which described GBV following a widely reported murder case in 2012 [39, 40, 41]. Several cases were identified of which five cases that met our inclusion criteria for GBV associated with social media acquaintances were selected for reporting by the lead author. Additional information on the cases was retrieved by searching the internet using the names of the victims and/or the perpetrators to obtain additional information from other websites. The data retrieved from the searches included: ages of the victims, types of violence experienced, history of prior face to face meeting before violence occurred, location of such meetings or interactions and surrounding circumstances. Information was also obtained on the number of perpetrators, their ages, and occupation if they were apprehended, if prosecution was instituted and the current or final status of the case. Lastly, information was obtained on the social media platform used for communication. Information retrieved from different websites on each case was chronologically sequenced in order to describe the progression of, and the eventual outcome of each case identified.

Results

Three journal publications were identified to be related to GBV and Social Media and had mentioned the first two cases identified which are further elaborated upon in this manuscript [39, 40, 41]. The other three cases of GBV identified are described here for the first time. In all seven cases were identified and five most suitable have been described. In one of the two cases left out, though the woman had died at her home while her acquaintance had been visiting her, this was not deemed to be a case of GBV.

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Case 1:

In July 2012, CO a 25-year-old postgraduate student travelled from Nasarawa in North-central Nigeria to Lagos in the Southwest of the country (a distance of more than 900 kilometers) to meet a friend she had become acquainted with on Facebook. The friend (ON) had bought the ticket for her to fly to see him in Lagos. He also arranged accommodation for the visit in a hotel. CO was a former beauty queen runner-up. She was also a model and entrepreneur who sold women’s clothing. On the trip, she planned to buy clothes to sell at her boutique and was expected to travel with cash. The perpetrator had posed as a modeling agent who had interest in marketing her as a model. This was to be her first meeting with her “boyfriend”. Unknown to her, ON was a social media predator who had invited three other members of his gang to the hotel where she was to be accommodated. On arrival at the hotel, she was given a drugged drink and physically abused (beaten and tied up). She was also threatened verbally in an attempt to obtain money from her when it was discovered she did not have much money on her. After being tied up, she was sexually abused by the four men (ages 24, 25, 33,
34 years). They also recorded the abuse on a mobile phone. She was eventually murdered by strangulation and her body abandoned in the hotel following which the perpetrators fled. CO’s phone and other belongings were carted away. Her phone was later sold off to someone outside Lagos. However, the police were able to track the buyer who provided information on how he acquired the phone. Also the hotel’s closed circuit television helped the police to identify the perpetrators. The criminals were caught in possession of the video recording of the abuse and subsequently charged to court. In this video, the faces of the perpetrators were masked while CO’s was clearly visible. It was unclear if the video had been disseminated via the internet. The final outcome of the case was still pending a verdict as at April 2015, the most recent information available on the internet.

Since this case made the headlines, four other women have come forward to report being drugged and raped by this same group of men to the police, though none reported immediately after the abuse took place. Two of the perpetrators confessed that CO was their sixth victim. It was also unclear if any social media had been used to recruit the previous women.

Case 2:

NO, was a 21 year old undergraduate. On 30th October 2012, she agreed to a date for the first time with a male graduate (AO, 26 years old) she had made acquaintance with on Facebook. Initially, the duo went to a club together and then retired to the family home of AO in Lagos. On arrival at the home, AO smoked marijuana before attempting to coerce NO to have sex, after she had turned down his advances. AO threatened to hit NO with a bottle, following which she jumped (or was pushed) from the third floor apartment. NO suffered multiple injuries including a fractured pelvis. On November 10th 2012, AO was arraigned in court on a three-count charge of causing bodily harm, attempted rape and threat to life. However, neither NO nor her counsel showed up in court. The case was adjourned for the same reason on two other occasions. In February 2013, the trial judge struck off the case. Prior to this, AO’s lawyer had claimed NO and AO’s families were trying to settle out of court. The outcome of any settlement reached was unavailable.

Case 3:

On the 15th October, 2013 a 25 year old lady (XX – not real initial) travelled by road from Benin to Lagos (a distance of about 300 kilometers) to meet with her boyfriend (OK), a 34 year old graduate whom she had met on Facebook. This was to be their first face to face meeting. XX was said to have been detained in a room in OK’s apartment for five days and repeatedly raped during that period. In addition, OK alleged that XX took five thousand naira (US$ 25) from her before she eventually escaped. On the 23rd October, OK was arraigned for rape and stealing. However, there was limited follow up information on the outcome of the case. Only details of his first court appearance were available.

Case 4:

FU, a customs officer met a 23 year old lady (LL – not real initial) on Facebook and invited her to his apartment in Lagos in May 2014. This invitation came after they had been communicating over the social media for about six months. FU discussed having consensual sex with LL, however she declined. Unknown to LL, FU had invited his friend MS, also a customs officer to the apartment, who joined him in having forced sex with LL. After the rape, LL reported the incident to the police, which led to the arrest of both men. During the arrest there was evidence of forced sex, which included blood stains on the bed and underweear of both men. The perpetrators begged to have the matter settled out of court. The customs authorities confirmed the affiliation of the men with their organization and promised to address such misconduct. Information on the punishment meted out to FU and MS by the customs authorities and the verdict of the court case were unavailable.

Case 5:

On the 26th December 2014, AA, a 17-year-old student fell from the fourth floor of an uncompleted 18 storey building in Lagos after being lured there by a male friend (BB – not real
initial) she had met on Facebook. BB told AA he lived in the uncompleted building with his family. On arrival at the building, AA realized the building was deserted and initially made to retreat. However, BB drew a knife and forced her up the building. On getting to the fourth floor, BB asked AA to undress, an order which she refused to comply with. BB made phone calls for other friends to join him, stating to AA that he was a cultist and she would pay for disobeying his orders. In the process of calling his friends, BB was distracted hence AA made for a window and attempted to climb down. Unfortunately, she fell to the ground and sustained fractures to her upper limbs and one lower limb. BB escaped from the building before help could reach AA and was never caught.

**Discussion**

The women described in the five cases highlighted experienced physical, psychological and sexual violence. The first and the third victims were also economically violated. Facebook is one of the most popular social media patronized by Nigerians. Hence, it is unsurprising that all the cases described met their aggressors through this platform. It is also interesting that the five cases highlighted occurred in Lagos. This could mean that there are many social media enthusiasts in Lagos compared to other parts of the country or it could also be on account of the high news media presence in Lagos, hence the increased reporting of cases happening in the city. Also, Lagos is a metropolitan city where people from all parts of the country migrate to in search of a livelihood. Thus, the city has a large concentration of unemployed youth, who may turn to crime. Some of the victims travelled from cities outside Lagos to meet with these predators. This suggests people from less developed parts of the country may be more trusting, thereby becoming targets of the perpetrators of violence. All the perpetrators were young adults with ages ranging from 24 – 34 years, while their victims were much younger (17 – 25 years). The ages of both victims and perpetrators are a reflection of the high use of the social media by young adults in Nigeria.

Lately, there has been an increase in the number of rape and statutory rape cases reported in Nigeria. With increased access to the internet especially by minors, the potential contribution of the social media to this increase in sexual violence cannot be ignored and requires further investigation. As a result of stigma, rape is usually underreported to law enforcers. Hence, perpetrators often get away unpunished and continue to perpetrate the crime. Thus, it is unsurprising that only after CO’s (case 1) ordeal made the headlines did four other women sum up the courage to report that they had also been similarly assaulted by ON and his gang. Perhaps, there are more women that have been assaulted by the group but did not come out because of stigma. Had they reported earlier, an unnecessary death could have been averted. Although rape in Nigeria is a punishable offence with a life sentence and attempted rape by 14 years imprisonment (with or without caning), the laws have also been identified as hindering reporting and successful prosecution of rape cases. This is because the laws require rape survivors to prove that consent was not given, a demand most survivors find difficult to meet. Such could have impacted on Case 4 which was perpetrated by the Customs officers and the unreported cases identified in the first case study described. It would have been difficult to convince law enforcement agents that consent was not given since they had willingly followed their attackers to secluded places. Often rape survivors are blamed as having put themselves in situations that led to the rape with people justifying their ordeal as deserving. However, the perpetrators most often plan out their strategy deceiving their potential targets. Survivors of forced sexual intercourse besides having to care for physical injuries sustained during the rape, may also suffer from the long term psychological consequences of the abuse.

Social media users feel anonymous and may hide their true identity. Unfortunately the false identities given can be used to entice gullible women who believe these to be true. CO (case 1) believed her aggressor had genuine business interests. Agreement to physically meeting online acquaintances may be misconstrued as interest in
developing a relationship or even engaging in consensual sexual intercourse. All the cases identified showed that the women had overtly trusted their online acquaintances; the aggressors communicated with the victims for several weeks and gained their trust before showing their true nature. A qualitative study of Nigerian undergraduates found that many were social media users who demonstrated trust in their online relationships. Trust was developed based on the number of interactions with the new friend and the period over which interaction had taken place.19

Perpetrators often go seeking for contacts that are lonely, seeking companionship and probably financial gain as well. Also, some perpetrators seek opportunities to overcome loneliness and social awkwardness using the anonymity of the internet. However, prolonged social media interactions create a false sense of familiarity and security, which allows women to fall victim to their perpetrators. Aggressors use these vulnerabilities to bait and exploit unsuspecting women. Nonetheless, it should be acknowledged that genuine relationships have been made on social media.19

Recording the rape of a victim and sharing such on social media could lead to severe psychological disturbances for survivors. For many individuals, it results in loss of self-esteem and severe psychological consequences that can lead to suicide. The story of Amanda Todd, a teenager who committed suicide after her online acquaintance released nude pictures which she had shared with him privately on the social media is a sad example. Similar cases have been reported by Dodge (2016). For the family, it could cause emotional trauma. Although CO was murdered, her family would have been humiliated and traumatized to see the video recording of her rape in court.

The findings from this study have implications for programming and policy. The law on rape in Nigeria needs to be revised to be more supportive of the survivors. First, the law currently requires that survivors prove that consent was not given, a feat which many find difficult to achieve. Consistent with what obtains in socially advanced countries, the law should protect the right of people to choose whether or not to have sex. Indeed, the law should be revised to recognize lack of consent based on the survivor’s assertion of use of force or threats; evidence that the survivor was not capable of giving valid consent by reason of intoxication, drug, sleep, young age or mental incapability; or evidence that the survivor was deceived as to the true identity of the perpetrator.31,54. There is also need for policy measures and adequate budgetary allocations that allow easy coordination of medical, psychosocial and legal services for rape survivors and victims of GBV since evidence from the three sources are needed for a successful prosecution.

Nonetheless, legal reforms alone are not enough for sustainable change in the incidence of social media-related or other forms of rape. Fostering individual and social change is crucial. While the use of the internet and social media can no longer be separated from the everyday life of many Nigerians, there is a need for interventions that address the possible social problems that may emanate from its use, especially for young people. Thus, educating young people on the responsible use of social media through schools, mass media, social media, work places and the community is critical. In addition, girls and young women need to learn to identify the danger signs of over-the-internet relationships while young men should be taught to respect the right of women to refuse sex and understand the evils of GBV.

The Nigerian government needs to realize that cybercrimes have become a social problem in Nigeria. Law-enforcement agencies in the country need to commit more resources towards the prevention of cybercrimes. This will include special training for law-enforcement agents and resources for mining internet data to proactively identify online discussions by men tending to exploit women and take advantage of them. The information can then be used for the purpose of crime monitoring and prosecution.

In a context of inequitable gender norms, rape myths acceptance and sexual double standard, it is important to use a culturally appropriate and multimedia communication approach to address the complicity of silence around rape, in particular, and GBV, in general. Silence about rape can embolden perpetrators to continue to carry out such actions since they know families prefer to cover up rather than speak out for fear of negative
consequences. Indeed, the lack of open discussion about GBV, the tendency to blame women for their rape ordeal, and the stigma associated with being a rape survivor foster an environment where rape goes underreported, perpetrators are not punished and survivors continue to suffer emotionally and physically in silence. Such an environment also encourages out-of-court settlements, which leave the survivors considerably short-changed and does not help to deter future occurrences of rape.

Programmatically, there is a lot that can be done to improve the quality of life of rape survivors. Access to prompt medical care, psychosocial support and legal assistance is crucial. Community support programs for rape survivors are urgently required to address stigmatization and encourage victims to report their ordeal and seek justice. Support groups can helprape survivors to regain their self-confidence, publicly take a stand against rape in their communities, and educate communities on the harmful effects of rape. In addition support groups could serve as rallying points to jointly seek justice for victims and to form pressure groups that will advocate for a change in legislation that characteristically threatens legal success.

This paper is one of the first scientific articles to discuss the physical and sexual GBV that women experience following face to face meetings with acquaintances made on social media in Nigeria. However, psychological abuses such as name calling and other cyber-bullying acts that are perpetrated as writings on the social media are also a form of violence and should be further investigated.

Limitations

This paper presents an evolving phenomenon which we link to the rising access to the internet and social media in Nigeria. However, our observation may not be representative of the true burden of the problem because of the poor reporting of GBV including rape in our environment. Our observation may be further hampered by the fact that many rape cases never made it to the media even if they were reported to the police. Thus, such cases could not be included in our analysis since most of our data came from online media thereby contributing to underestimation of the magnitude of the problem. Notwithstanding, these cases provide important information on an emerging phenomenon. In addition, the record hits were voluminous in Google Search and several of the records appearing after about the first 20 pages were not related to the study objective. Thus, most of the records after these patterns appeared were not reviewed.

Conclusion

There is an emergence of GBV associated with social media acquaintances in Nigeria and probably many other countries where internet use is growing as well. There is a need to sensitize women about this potential danger and also ensure perpetrators are apprehended and prosecuted. More extensive research using both quantitative and qualitative data is recommended.

Contribution of Authors

OAM, COO and OIF conceived and drafted the first version of the manuscript. JOA and SOB critically reviewed and improved the quality of the manuscript. All authors have read and agreed to the final version of the manuscript.

References


Gender-Based Violence and Social Media


