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Child Trafficking in the Digital Age: The Role of the Dark Web and Cryptocurrencies in Facilitating E-Sexual Exploitation in West Africa

Serifat Bolanle Asiyanbi

Department of History & International Studies
Federal University, Oye-Ekiti,
Nigeria

asiyanbiserifat@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1815-2067>

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Oluwaseun Olajumoke Agboola

Department of History and International Studies
Federal University Oye-Ekiti,
Nigeria.

oluwaseun.agboola@fuoye.edu.ng

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Abstract

This study explores how the dark web, anonymous payment options, and technological advances aid in the spread of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), online grooming, and livestreamed abuse. It discusses how socioeconomic factors and COVID-19 restrictions have increased children's vulnerability, especially in West Africa. Using a qualitative approach, the research reviews documents, scholarly articles, and investigative media and employs snowball sampling to identify relevant sources on cyber-enabled child exploitation. Insights from Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovation Theory help explain how traffickers adopt new technologies in promoting child exploitation. The results show that the dark web's encryption, unindexed sites, real-time platforms, and anonymity tools provide a low-risk environment for traffickers to share CSAM, with transactions conducted using cryptocurrencies, which benefit from their pseudonymous features. The paper identifies structural issues, such as weak online safety policies, along with systemic impediments like socio-economic inequality, as significant factors that increase children's risk of falling prey to trafficking networks. The study concludes that fighting digital child trafficking effectively requires strong policies, such as strong digital governance and comprehensive educational programmes, to safeguard the innocent children from predators.

Keywords: *Child sexual abuse material; Diffusion of Innovation; Online grooming; Livestream abuse; Digital vulnerability.*

Introduction

Technological advancement has revolutionised all fields and disciplines, adversely affecting the world's sustainable development. The impact of technology has been felt both positively and negatively, particularly in the modus operandi of human trafficking, where individuals with criminal intent have deceived their potential underage children through the creation of online fake platforms for child exploitation. Research indicates that the unethical exposure of underage children to unregulated social media platforms makes them vulnerable to unscrupulous activities. This became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, which took the world by surprise. The quarantine measures, coupled with work-from-home due to the COVID-19 outbreak, reduced household incomes and work hours, exposing families to social media activities and leaving children more vulnerable to online exploitation. UNODC reports that more than 50% of underage boys and girls are working remotely and unknowingly in trafficking den of criminal moguls, 38% are into sextortion and forced labour, 1.5% in pornography, and 1% in forced marriage, among others (UNODC Reports on TIPs, 2018). The report indicates that these children are the victims of circumstance, and criminal business moguls invest in their vulnerabilities and recruit them through online platforms and web advertisements for hook-ups. Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) (2022; 2024) also documents 1.6 million children as victims of online trafficking between 2020 and 2022, with 291,273 web pages that contained child sexual abuse material, with a striking pose of 91% of self-generated content. In 2023, the NCMEC also documented 36 million children for online sexual exploitation (NCMEC, 2024). While the reports indicate a startling rise in online child sexual abuse and exploitation during the COVID-19 pandemic with the use of digital platform such as social media, messaging apps, and file-sharing sites, the study has it online child trafficking under the pretence of tackling poverty or elevating the family from the poverty shackle is not a COVID-19 phenomenon, the pandemic only exposed and change the narrative of online child trafficking coupled with the sales of sexual abused materials through onion layers with information security protection.

The virtual child right abuse practice is historically dated back to 2004 when criminal cartels utilised free-standing web pages to promote sexual services and connect potential victims with tourist activities, often without the victims' knowledge. The COVID-19 pandemic merely exposed the strategies of engagement that criminally minded people used to adapt their modus operandi to cyberspace, with full protection for both potential victims and clients against societal stigmatisation (Glo Tips, 2020). The West African sub-region is not immune to the proliferation of online child sexual abuse material, coupled with the risks associated with it. Though the West African sub-region lacks the accurate data to evaluate the extent to which children have been trafficked, abused and molested, the NCMEC notes that between 2019 and 2022, 21000 cases were reported, with Côte d'Ivoire taking the lead, followed by Nigeria, Cape Verde and Ghana. While the UNODC country office in Nigeria also notes that more than 75% of trafficking victims that

were detected in West Africa are children (UNODC, 2021), with a high rate of abuse, which shows that West African countries remain the hub of child trafficking, the origin, transit and destination. Deane (2017) also explores the West African sub-region and opines that West African countries remain the region with the highest number of child trafficking, as UNODC (2020) and Gunther (2021) note countries like Mali, Senegal, Guinea-Bissau and Gambia with their prevalence of child trafficking for labour, prostitution, street begging and child pornography. Hoang & Wagner (2023) note a high rate of child trafficking for sexting in Ghana, sextortion and revenge pornography in Cape Verde, while Nigeria, Benin, and Togo are not left out in promoting child labour and child pornography, including nude pictures and pornographic materials.

In addition to this, the African Child Policy Forum, in one of their reports submitted to the African Union in 2019, called Africa “a new frontier of online sexual abuse” and explained further that the West African sub-region remains the landscape of vulnerabilities for child sexual exploitation and online child sexual abuse materials (CSEAM) (Hoang & Wagner, 2023). While the INTERPOL and FBI opine that the criminal networks based in the region are professionals in the use of sextortion schemes with a range of coercion techniques without being noticed (Hoang & Wagner, 2023). The high incidence of child trafficking in the West African sub-region is linked to economic hardship that creates a gap between needs and the lawful means to meet them (Asiyanbi, 2021). Some scholars highlight a significant level of violence against children, cultural practices such as giving underage girls in marriage, and superstitions like sex with underage virgin girls being seen as a remedy for HIV/AIDS. Additionally, growing global travel and tourism continue to fuel child trafficking in the region (Hoang & Wagner, 2023). The paper also notes that increased use of technology, coupled with its unregulated nature, exposes vulnerable children to unethical activities on social media platforms. This raises a critical question about the impact of technological progress on social security in West Africa: Does technology protect vulnerable youth from unfettered social media use, or does it also serve as a double-edged sword? Furthermore, how do the dark web and cryptocurrencies subtly facilitate child trafficking in the region?

The Concept of Child and Child Trafficking

Childhood is a relative concept with varying connotations. A child can be defined by age, developmental stage, and maturity. The labour acts see child as a young person above the age of twelve and below sixteen years of age (Garner, 2001), while the African Charter on the Right and Welfare of the Child (1990), the United Nations Convention on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the Nigerian Contract Law define a child according to Child Right Act (2003) as any human being below 18 years. In general, all West African countries define a child under the Child Rights Act (CRA) (2003), except Côte d'Ivoire, which defines a child under its Minority Act (1970) as any person below 21 years of age. Therefore, a child is any human being who is still in the formative stage and less capable of making reasonable decisions about their life. In the West African sub-region, some countries, notably Nigeria, have sought to revise the age of maturity to 16 years. However, the paper considers 18 years as the standard benchmark for a child. Engaging any child below the age of 18 years in exploitative activities, whether virtual or physical, is therefore regarded as ‘child rights abuse’. As Mohammed (2024) points out, the CRA (2003) provides that agreements involving individuals under this age are generally voidable because children are considered incapable of forming the necessary intent. Consequently, subjecting these young people to exploitative conditions is seen as a serious violation of their human rights.

Different schools of thought define child trafficking from their various perspectives. For instance, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and its associated Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (OPSC), the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), the International Labour Organisation (ILO), and the U.S. Department of State see child trafficking as an infringement on a child’s inherent dignity and entitlement to protection. While the OPSC focuses on the sale of children. The African Union and ECOWAS align their definition of child trafficking with the United Nations Palermo Protocol (2000) and UNHCR (2006) and define child trafficking as an ‘act’ and ‘purpose’. While explaining further, child trafficking is an act when the recruitment, transportation, transfers, harbouring or receipt of a person under 18 years old for exploitation purposes takes place. The exploitation purpose is a component of forced labour, sexual exploitation, such as the use of underage children for pornography, prostitution, sextainment, and forced begging, among others. The definition excluded the means since the victims are underage, and the act of deception and or

coercion could not be established. While the United Nations Supplementary Convention (1956), which frames contemporary trafficking as a reincarnation of slavery, see the child trafficking as an exploitation of minors. The UNODC reports also highlight how contemporary trafficking blends *physical* and *digital* spheres, with social media, messaging apps, and online advertisements and define it as an exploitation of minors through various means (UNODC, 2020; 2022).

Scholars like Bales (2007), Scarpa (2008), and Doezeema (2010) define child trafficking as an act of exploitation and abuse of children's vulnerability for commercial sex work, pornography, forced labour, cyber-fraud, begging, and criminal exploitation, among others, by criminal business moguls for their business gains. Kara (2009) conceptualises child trafficking as a sexual act and posits that sex trafficking is a market system rooted in global inequalities, where vulnerable people from low-resource settings are drawn into exploitative roles to satisfy international demand for prostitution, pornography and sex entertainment. Rose (2022) describes child trafficking as the illegal procurement of vulnerable children under the guise of promoting their welfare, upgrading their standard, and protecting their human dignity. The global demand for underage boys and girls to serve as sextertainment in various nightclubs, performers in tourist centres, or involvement in pornography production and pre-ordering sex even without physically being present leads to a high rise of child trafficking, particularly in the aftermath of the pandemic. The contemporary child trafficking explains the paradigm shift in the narration of child trafficking and how criminally minded people exploit underage girls and boys and objectify them to all sorts of exploitation in the digital age. This shows that the advent of technology has shifted the traditional trafficking networks to technologically enabled systems, which blurred the boundaries between physical transportation and virtual exploitation, creating new opportunities for traffickers to groom, manipulate and profit from children remotely, particularly in the West African sub-region.

In the West African context, child trafficking must be understood beyond the digital space. Many scholars draw parallels between current trafficking practices and past forms of slavery, such as “*iwofa*”, where stricken poverty families pledged their children into servitude (Asiyanbi et al., 2025). Today, instead of physical bondage, traffickers rely on digital deception, emotional manipulation and fraudulent online accounts to gain victims' trust. The paper, therefore, conceptualises child trafficking as a reincarnation of old slavery (*iwofa*) through modern techniques aimed at the sustainable growth of eco-tourism and pornography via diplomatic online bargaining. Diplomatic online bargaining means an intersection where the predators have shifted away from the physical recruitment and direct coercion and adopt subtle negotiation and pacification methods to deceptively convince their potential victims of the need to evade poverty sooner through fraudulent online accounts.

Theoretical Clarification

The diffusion of innovation theory is a social science theory that highlights the importance of new techniques and showcases existing or new ideas to the world. Developed by Everett Rogers in 1962, diffusion of innovation theory is a mode of the diffusion of novel ideas to a broader community, regardless of location. It is a method of shifting away from traditional communication concepts toward new information-sharing techniques that do not depend on intermediaries before spreading beyond the four walls. The theory is grounded in the digital revolution and facilitates the dissemination of information through synchronous and asynchronous methods (Rogers, 2003). Synchronous and asynchronous communication encompasses social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, TikTok), podcasts, and websites (surface and deep webs), email, and search engines, among others, for information dissemination.

The significance of diffusion of innovation theory to this paper lies in its emphasis on synchronous and asynchronous communication, coupled with the broader scope for propagating existing or new ideas worldwide. The issue of child trafficking is as old as the issue itself, but the advent of technology has increased the rates of child vulnerabilities as the criminally minded moguls used search engines, among others, to advertise their illicit acts and at the same time, the use of the encrypted web, particularly the onion layer, to safeguard the information of both potential clients and victims. The traffickers and criminally minded alike have used technology to propagate and disseminate their deception beyond geographical boundaries through synchronous and asynchronous media of communication. Synchronous

is a virtual communication channel that enables immediate communication between the recruiter and potential buyer, showcases vulnerable victims through video conferencing and social media platforms such as TikTok, Facebook, Instagram, podcasts, and Threads, among others, and validates business transactions in real time. Asynchronous communication uses the web (surface and deep), e-mail, and other search engines to promote illegal activities and coordinate online business transactions.

Advances in technology have conferred a relative advantage on potential buyers and recruiters by reducing physical risk, eliminating intermediaries in negotiations, and objectifying potential victims as potential clients. In addition, there is national identity protection through web layers, with cryptocurrencies as the medium of exchange. Although cryptocurrencies do not facilitate illicit business, the assurance of identity security made the channel comfortable for criminally minded individuals to conduct illicit transactions without leaving a significant trace.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how digital technologies, specifically the dark web, cryptocurrencies, and online platforms, facilitate not only child trafficking but also the sale of online sexual abuse materials. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the covert, sensitive, and illegal nature of the subject. Data collection involved reviewing reports from UNODC, OSCE, Europol, IWF, and NCMEC, along with scholarly literature, including peer-reviewed articles, books, and media sources on trafficking and cyber-exploitation, which provided contextual insights into actual trafficking cases. The study used a snowball sampling method, starting with key documents and following references and citations to identify additional relevant sources. This technique helped gather a broad and diverse set of literature on digital trafficking, incorporating multiple perspectives. Data analysis was conducted using thematic content analysis to identify recurring patterns in online recruitment, anonymity tools, and technological exploitation. The interpretation was guided by Everett Rogers' Diffusion of Innovations theory, which illustrates how traffickers adopt emerging technologies to expand their networks. No human subjects were involved, and all data handling complied with ethical research standards.

Discussion

Child Trafficking in the Digital Age

The dynamics of technology and globalisation have left an indelible mark on the field of human trafficking and child exploitation, fundamentally transforming the landscape of child trafficking and creating unprecedented opportunities for traffickers to recruit, exploit, and profit from vulnerable children. Advances in technology, globalisation, and widespread internet access enabled traffickers to embrace innovation during and in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, shifting from traditional face-to-face recruitment to sophisticated, technology-driven operations. These shifts have blurred the boundaries between online and physical exploitation, making digital platforms central to the trafficking process (UNODC, 2020; OSCE, 2022). The Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE, 2020) views advances in technology as a new medium that traffickers and criminal business moguls use to canvass and engage potential victims through synchronous and asynchronous communication to reach their clients.

Research indicates that synchronous platforms like video calls, live-streaming apps, TikTok, Instagram Live, Twitter (X), Viber, Snapchat, and encrypted messaging remain vital tools for criminals. Instances were given on how traffickers often create fake profiles on the platforms mentioned above to befriend minors, send personalised messages to build trust, and manipulate children by offering online modelling jobs, money, or emotional support. They sometimes coerce minors into sharing nude images or engaging in sexual acts online and use these images as leverage for further exploitation (Human Trafficking Front, 2023; NSPCC, 2023). Additionally, traffickers increasingly monitor children's online activities through comments, posts, geo-tags, photos, and friendship patterns to refine their grooming strategies. The combination of high visibility and limited parental oversight makes social media a prime environment where potential buyers or viewers can request live sexual content or showcase victims' sexual talents during live sessions. Conversely, asynchronous platforms, including surface web, dark-web forums, hidden websites, and cloud storage, facilitate the distribution of child sexual abuse material (CSAM), victim advertising, grooming, and planning future transactions. This digital transformation enables traffickers to operate with minimal physical contact,

lowering detection risks and broadening their reach to a global audience (Beech et al., 2008; Kloess et al., 2014). Their extensive use stems from unregulated content-sharing and algorithmic amplification, creating an environment where vulnerable children can easily become victims.

As globalisation transformed the world into a global village, where communication barriers have been reduced, the scope of illicit business continues to expand, leaving more children vulnerable in online markets, particularly in West Africa. According to reports from NCMEC and the Cyber Tipline, there has been an increase in OCSEA incidents across the West African Sub-region. The reports indicate that between 2019 and 2022, 21,000 cases were reported, with Cape Verde, Ghana, and Nigeria having the highest number of OCSEA. The NCMEC, Cyber Tipline bar chart further explains that Nigeria had the highest number of OCSEA in 2022, with over 120,000 cases, followed by Côte d'Ivoire with 30,000 and Ghana with 22,000, while Benin Republic, Burkina Faso, and Guinea, among others, have fewer than 20,000 cases (NCMEC, Cyber Tipline report for ECOWAS, 2020-2022). Additionally, in 2022, 347 children were rescued from sex trafficking dens, and 19% of them were recruited online via social media (Human Trafficking Front, 2023).

In contrast, the UNODC, together with NAPTIP, in a joint report, acknowledged the widespread issue of child trafficking in West Africa. They reported that out of 3336 trafficking victims in the region, 2553 were children forced into labour (UNODC Nigeria, 2021). The report also details the involvement of both girls and boys, estimating that 1,164 girls and 1,389 boys were involved. It specifically documents child trafficking related to forced labour in West Africa. Meanwhile, organisations like NCMEC, Cyber Tipline, and scholars such as Sita (2003), Gould (2011), Kreston (2014, 2017), Sowale (2018), and Mlambo & Ndebele (2021) emphasise the high prevalence of child trafficking for online abuse in the region. These researchers further explain that vulnerable children in West Africa largely dominate and control the region's online commercial sex industry. Additionally, the Africa Centre for Strategic Studies reports that 17% of online sexual abuse trafficking victims in East Africa and 7% in North Africa originate from West Africa.

Various arguments have been proposed regarding why the OCSEA and OCSAM data have not been effectively captured by NAPTIP and other human trafficking agencies in the sub-region, despite reports from NCMEC, Cyber Tipline on the prevalence of online child trafficking abuse. This paper attempts to explain why NAPTIP's data on the sexual exploitation of vulnerable children is limited, referencing Hoang and Wagner (2023). They argue and attribute the underreporting of online child sexual abuse victims to any regional anti-trafficking agencies to a lack of evidence due to victims' fear of stigmatisation. The online victims of sexual exploitation often refrain from reporting to anti-trafficking organisations because of the fear that their nude videos or pornographic images might be circulated, due to threats received from their traffickers, which may potentially cause further trauma. This lack of data, stemming from low awareness, has led to the misconception that OCSEA and OCSAM are rare issues, which in turn exacerbates their prevalence in the region.

Why are Children more Prone to Sexual Exploitation and Abuse Trafficking?

Children are among the most vulnerable groups in trafficking networks because of their developmental stage, limited agency, and reliance on adults for protection. A lack of proper parental guardianship, combined with external factors like environmental pressures, forced displacement, socio-economic inequality, and family instability, increases their vulnerability and creates opportunities for traffickers. These factors have been repeatedly recognised beyond West African borders as fundamental causes of child exploitation in both physical and online settings, as outlined below.

1. Environmental challenges are key drivers of child trafficking in affected areas

The increasing frequency and severity of climate-related disasters like floods, droughts, and erosion greatly affect the livelihoods of many, especially those in vulnerable and marginalised communities. These circumstances create opportunities for traffickers to target these populations with subtle diplomacy. Vulnerable communities might see their exploiters as saviours, tempted by false promises of hope amid their struggles after losing crops, livestock, and fertile land to extreme weather.

2. Inadequate Social Security Protection

Children face higher risks of trafficking when combined with factors like poor education, limited healthcare, poverty, and social protection. Their vulnerability is even greater due to a lack of awareness of safe internet use and the dangers of social media, which can lead to online exploitation. Disaster survivors often urgently need essentials such as food, shelter, healthcare, and sustainable income. Predators exploit this desperation by offering false promises of accommodation, food, or jobs. As a result, children resort to survival sex or trading their bodies for basic needs. This coping mechanism is tied to high rates of human rights abuses, torture, and maltreatment.

3. Migrants and Forcibly Displaced Families

Children from migrant and forcibly displaced families affected by war, ethno-religious crises, insurgencies, and other conflicts are among the most vulnerable to sex trafficking. These children often undertake unaccompanied journeys in search of a better life due to the hardships their families face. Socio-economic deprivation, broken family and social structures, and overcrowding in refugee camps increase their dependence on others offering help. Such conditions often expose them to predators who make false promises of a brighter future. According to recent global displacement data on West Africa, more than 108.4 million people were forcibly displaced in 2022, with an estimated 47.2 million children, including millions living in overcrowded refugee camps where violence, food scarcity and weak protection systems heighten risks (UNHCR, 2023). In such environments, traffickers exploit vulnerable children by offering shelter, transport or "opportunities," sometimes using digital platforms in refugee settlements to groom minors or coerce them into producing sexual content in exchange for necessities.

4. Out-of-School Children

When families cannot afford essentials, children might have to drop out of school and wander the streets seeking food and income. Many of these children are active online, which makes them vulnerable to predators aiming to exploit them for sexual abuse materials in exchange for food and shelter. This situation significantly increases the risk of online grooming for these children.

5. Socio-Economic Inequality and Poverty

Socio-economic inequality significantly predicts child vulnerability to trafficking. Disparities in income, education, food security, and access to essential services create structural barriers that traffickers often exploit (Asiyanbi, 2021). Evidence indicates that increasing educational inequality leads to unequal life opportunities, with children from low-income families more likely to face hazardous work, exploitation, and early sexualisation (Blanden et al., 2022). Additionally, research shows that poverty forces families to make survival decisions that increase children's risk of falling for false promises of work, such as modelling, domestic chores, or online "opportunities" that are often used as pretexts for sexual exploitation (IFS, 2021).

6. Single Parenting, Family Instability and Emotional Distress

Family instability, especially in single-parent households facing economic hardship, raises children's risk of exploitation. Single mothers, who often carry most caregiving and financial burdens, frequently encounter gender discrimination and limited job prospects, increasing danger for both them and their kids. Economic pressure, stress, and social stigma can impair parents' ability to supervise or spot online threats. Emotional distress, like loneliness or unmet needs, can make children more susceptible to traffickers who manipulate through affection, digital companionship, or financial incentives, leading to grooming (Kloess et al., 2014). All the factors outlined above have heightened children's vulnerability to predators seeking sexualised images, livestream interactions, or exploitative "jobs" (NSPCC, 2023; IWF, 2024). Children of single parents, especially those residing in urban slums, are the most vulnerable to pornographic content exposure, increasing their risk of online sexual exploitation. According to the INTERPOL (2020) report, 70.8% of victims are contacted via social media platforms like Facebook, Badoo, Gayda, and Afribaba. The report also notes that 2.8% of children surveyed who were involved in sexual abuse came from single-parent households in urban slums.

All the factors mentioned above increase children's susceptibility to predators seeking sexualised images, livestream interactions, or exploitative "jobs." Coupled with the rapid growth of digital technologies, these

systemic vulnerabilities create a highly favourable environment for traffickers. They exploit these conditions to force children into making pornography, carry out sextortion schemes, produce child sexual abuse material (CSAM), and engage in live-streamed sexual exploitation. This troubling overlap underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to protect children from such grave abuses in the digital realm.

Effect of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Child Trafficking

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a resurgence period of child trafficking through various digital platforms. Children in various households became more vulnerable to online predators as they spent more time online for remote schooling, entertainment, or income-generating opportunities. International monitoring has shown that crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic tend to increase both the vulnerability of potential victims and the adaptability of traffickers, who quickly shift towards online environments (UNODC, 2022). The closure of bars, clubs, and massage parlours as a quarantine measure for the new normal COVID-19 pandemic made the criminally minded people shift attention from traditional means of recruiting their potential victims to technology-based recruitment (Illias & UNODC, 2021). Social media platforms became a channel where recruiters contacted vulnerable children for fake jobs or “online or remote work with heavy pay,” and monitored them under the pretence of providing economic aid.

The COVID-19 pandemic digitalised traffickers' modus operandi, with the adequate use of social media platforms like TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram and Facebook, encrypted messaging, and video calls. According to Polaris Project (2021) and UNODC (2022), the internet remains one of the primary venues for child trafficking and recruitment, with online child sexual abuse material (CSAM) and live-streamed abuse increasing significantly. Child-protection organisations have identified numerous social media platforms as recruitment sites and various websites hosting child sexual abuse images and observed a rise in self-produced and coercively created content involving minors (IWF, 2024). The Human Trafficking Institute (2021) reports that 65% of underage victims involved in active criminal sex exploitation were recruited through Facebook, 14% via Instagram, and 8% through Snapchat.

The 2013 ECPAT report reveals that in Central, East, and West Africa, 54% of children have seen peers in online pornographic materials, and around 10% have been approached to share sexualized images. For instance, in West Africa, girls aged 14 to 17 are recruited for pornographic films and bestiality. The report indicates that online child sexual abuse and exploitation are longstanding issues in West Africa, predating the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the pandemic and associated stay-at-home measures have increased children's exposure to unmoderated social media, where criminal networks target teens using fake accounts to boost profits. According to the 2020 INTERPOL Global Crime Trend report, online child sexual abuse and exploitation rank among the top ten crimes perceived as very high risk, with a sharp rise in their trend.

Cryptocurrencies: A Virtual Medium for Security Identity Protection

In today's global finance sector, safeguarding sensitive identity data and ensuring privacy against theft and damage is essential. The virtual banking platform prioritises user identity and data security by leveraging blockchain technology and implementing measures to prevent unauthorised access. This example underscores the importance of the digital economy in securely managing and protecting customer information within a decentralised system, eliminating the need for intermediaries. The security features of this financial system allow the digital economy to conduct all transactions freely, whether licit or illicit, without dependence on traditional financial intermediaries.

Operating on decentralised blockchain networks, these virtual currencies enable users to safeguard their identities through encryption, pseudonymous peer-to-peer transactions, and distributed networks. Examples include using Tor and I2P as gateway browsers, which protect information and ensure data privacy. These mechanisms help individuals bypass censorship and maintain privacy, thereby protecting their users (Hayes et al., 2017). For instance, both legal and illegal markets often operate as hidden services on the Tor network; this protocol allows servers and clients to stay anonymous while communicating securely. Such platforms have been used for promoting and distributing products like child pornographic images, child abuse sexual material, sextortion, and other forms of sexual exploitation through cryptocurrencies (Cekerevecac, Dvorak & Cekerevecac, 2016).

Researchers and law enforcement officials argue that as cryptocurrencies promote legal services, they also promote illegal services, such as money laundering, cyber extortion, online scams, child pornography, sale of online sexual abuse materials and trafficking of children for online abuse (Naheem, 2021; Europol, 2022). The pseudo-anonymous nature of many crypto transactions allows traffickers and other criminals to accept payments for illegal goods and services, including child sexual abuse content and streamed exploitation. At the same time, the Tor browser continues to hide its true identities and information to avoid reputational damage. Reports from Europol and other organisations indicate that virtual currencies, such as cryptocurrencies, are deeply integrated into serious and organised crime, with offenders continually adapting their techniques to exploit regulatory weaknesses and technical challenges in tracking virtual assets (Europol, 2022).

Cryptocurrencies offer an "identity shield" in cases of child trafficking related to pornography, sexual exploitation and online sex abuse materials. They enable payments for livestreamed abuse, pay-per-view CSAM, or subscription services displaying such content, all without revealing personal details or linking directly to any bank accounts. Experts increasingly recognise cryptocurrencies as an agent in promoting modern slavery and child sexual abuse. The medium continues to shield the faces of illicit business moguls, promote illegal transactions and encourage the expansion of online trafficking markets. Anonymity reduces perceived risk for offenders, creating significant barriers to detection and prosecution (Naheem, 2021; Basel Institute on Governance, 2021).

Dark Web: A Comfort Zone for Promoting Cyber-Sex

The dark web is a deliberately concealed part of the internet that employs layered encryption, notably The Onion Router (Tor), to protect users' identities and locations. Unlike the surface web, accessible through standard search engines, dark web sites demand specialised software and addresses, rendering them nearly invisible to most users. This infrastructure provides strong anonymity for both providers and users, fostering various illegal activities such as the distribution of child image pornography, paedophiles, a privacy zealot, hit men for hire, display of online sexual abuse, and the distribution of child sexual abuse material (Beech et al., 2008; UNODC, 2020; Cole, 2016). The dark web acts as a "safe space" for offenders involved in child trafficking and pornography, hosting forums, marketplaces, and closed groups where images and videos of abused children are traded, circulated, or commissioned. Criminals utilise these platforms to solicit live shows with minors, coordinate cross-border exploitation, and share methods to avoid detection. Studies on online child sexual exploitation reveal how anonymity tools and encrypted communication have changed offenders' methods, allowing them to groom children, exchange CSAM, and organise abuse without physical contact (Kloess et al., 2014; Beech et al., 2008).

The dark web's obscurity has led some scholars to call it the 'seedy underbelly' of the internet, where illicit transactions occur (Cole, 2016). This nickname stems from its hosting of obscure websites that search engines like Google do not index and which are not easily accessed via standard browsers. According to IWF, there were 3266 URLs containing child porn images, along with 51 previously unknown hidden services distributing child sexual abuse content, and this is over 55% of those found in 2013 (IWF, 2015). The report notes that the rise in hidden services sharing child abuse material poses greater dangers than other illicit content, contributing to an increase in child sex abuse via the dark web. Dr Gareth Owen's research on hidden TOR sites revealed that 75% of dark web users visited child abuse sites and explained the tactics consumers use to avoid law enforcement detection (IWF, 2015). While explaining the tactics, consumers follow a logical approach to accessing dark websites, which are regularly relocated. Users need to contact the data host to obtain the current location of the real sites. Sometimes, users or data hosts create fake or scam sites, making it challenging for law enforcement to distinguish between genuine and dummy sites. These tactics have been used continuously to safeguard users' identities and evade detection for illegal activities on the dark web. Examples of such illegal online markets include Alphabay, Dream Market, and Hansa Market, among others.

Although the dark web is not exclusively used for criminal activities, it does host legitimate transactions such as communication and legal dealings. However, the widespread use of encryption and anonymising software to protect users and data makes it a convenient space for cybercrime, especially when it comes to exploiting vulnerable individuals' human rights. Not all harmful material is confined to the dark web; much of it can also be accessed via the open internet.

Conclusion and Suggestions

Child trafficking in the digital era is a complex, urgent problem requiring swift, effective responses from society and authorities. Advances in technology have increased the risk of young, innocent individuals being exposed to unfiltered, often predatory content. Social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter facilitate traffickers' ability to promote their services, making it easier to target victims. The interplay of technological progress, globalisation, and socioeconomic inequalities creates an environment where child trafficking, particularly for pornography and online sexual exploitation, flourishes. Protecting vulnerable children involves breaking down criminal networks and addressing systemic injustices that lead to online sexual exploitation and abuse. A comprehensive, coordinated, and child-centred strategy is crucial to their safety and includes, among other measures, the following:

1. Enhance Digital Governance and Regulatory Structures in West Africa; West African governments must update and enforce cybercrime laws that suit today's digital environment. Regulations should address issues such as online grooming, CSAM distribution, anonymous cryptocurrency transactions linked to exploitation, unregulated advertising platforms, and dark-web marketplaces. The establishment of mandatory report requirements for social media, internet service providers, and financial institutions aiding and abetting illicit activities. These organisations should promptly block harmful content, report suspected exploitation, and cooperate with law enforcement agencies. Moreover, there is a need to develop advanced cyber-forensic skills and law enforcement capabilities in West Africa.
2. Countries should invest in specialised anti-trafficking cyber units capable of tracking cryptocurrency transactions, monitoring dark web activities, conducting undercover digital investigations, identifying and removing CSAM, and collaborating with international policing networks. Cross-border cooperation is essential because online trafficking networks operate across jurisdictions and exploit legal differences between them.
3. Promote digital literacy among children, parents, and educators. Educationists should implement digital safety programmes that teach children to identify illegal activities and online grooming behaviours used for abuse. Parents, especially those without proper access to education, need to be informed about the dangers of unregulated social media platforms and guided on how to recognise early signs of online exploitation in their children. Schools should incorporate thorough sex education and online safety curricula to equip children with the knowledge needed to prevent manipulation and exploitation.
4. Governments should prioritise social security policies that will protect children from exploitation. Tackling social security issues such as chronic poverty, income inequality, food insecurity, limited access to education, gender discrimination, unemployment, informal labour insecurity, and weak child protection systems remains critical in minimising online child exploitation. Strengthening social protection programmes, increasing welfare support for single-parent households, and improving mental health services can significantly lessen children's vulnerability to traffickers.
5. Strengthening public-private partnerships continues to play a vital role in dismantling online trafficking networks. Strengthening community awareness and survivor support is essential, as communities need to learn how to identify trafficking signs and report concerns.
6. Survivor-informed programmes can strengthen prevention efforts by increasing community awareness of online risks, lowering stigma around victims, providing psychosocial and reintegration support, and preventing re-victimisation of vulnerable individuals through sustained care. Using a trauma-informed approach is especially vital because children exploited digitally endure continued harm when their images or videos remain online even after the abuse stops.

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