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Unveiling the Shadows: The Tactics of Social Media Platforms on Human Trafficking in Mbeya, Tanzania

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Abstract

This paper aims to explore the tactics that the traffickers use on the media platforms in the Mbeya Region of Tanzania. The analysis involved 35 respondents, including victims, community leaders and law enforcers. The study used the descriptive research design whereby questionnaires were developed and used in data collection. The results indicated that the most often used social media platforms were Facebook (40%) and WhatsApp (30%), while Instagram ranked third with 20% and the last was Telegram (10%). The majority of the affected respondents were young women ages 18-24 years making up 50% of the participants. This article identified emotional manipulation, social proof, and fake job offers as the most common recruitment strategies. The outcomes reveal the critical need for strategic approaches and community awareness in combating the enabled trafficking by the use of social media.

Keywords: *Human Trafficking, Social Media, Mbeya Region, Tanzania, Exploitation, Qualitative Analysis*

1. Introduction

Human trafficking is one of the biggest global challenges which is described as the illegal trade of people for forced labour, sexual exploitation or for commercial purposes (Han, 2024). This particular crime includes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, or illicit harbouring of persons by the use of force, fraud, or coercion (Thurman, 2023). It includes a spectrum of activities from the recruitment to the use of victims, often achieved with threats, coercion or deception to make people work or engage in commercial sexual activities (Williamson, 2022). It is crucial to have a good understanding to be able to view the relationship between human trafficking and social media with the concerns of security. Social media has become an important tool for traffickers in the exploitation of people (Fraser 2016). The easy access and anonymity that is offered by platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat make it easy for traffickers to operate (Raets & Janssens, 2021). These platforms are commonly utilized to lure and exploit prospective victims via fake personas and other types of fraud (Sarkar, 2015). The global nature of social media makes it possible for traffickers to operate in different countries at the same time thus greatly increasing their efficiency (Movsisyan, 2018). Although some positive steps have been made by the community, and also social media platforms in addressing these vices, their responses have been slow and often seen as inadequate (Diba et al., 2018).

In Africa, the use of social media has posed new challenges in the fight against this crime particularly in economically challenged countries (Motseki and Mofokeng 2022). The traffickers use social media networks such as; WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram to lure the victims with promises of well-paying jobs, education or marriage (Sundani, 2023). Thus, social media has become an essential tool for traffickers to find people who want to escape poverty or poor living conditions. This is because there is a low level of digital literacy in many parts of Africa which makes consumers easier to be scammed (Motseki, 2022). Traffickers usually build up a relationship with the victims via social networks and then force them into trafficking, a tactic that is especially often observed in cities with better internet coverage and higher rates of youth social media usage (Mugari, 2020). In Tanzania, social media is a common way through which human traffickers get victims and transport them for exploitation (Thomas, 2019). Usually, the traffickers use social media networks such as WhatsApp and Facebook to attract the potential victims of trafficking which are mainly women by offering them jobs, education or a better life abroad (John, 2018). These platforms are also often used to create fake accounts and job advertisements and therefore there is a need to understand the strategies that go into creating these fake narratives.

In the recruitment process, social media is also used by the traffickers to control and manipulate the victims. However, the specific operations that are used, or the kind of threats posed or ways of isolation are not well addressed by the current literature. Furthermore, since many Tanzanians are still illiterate and cannot well use digital technologies, they are easily vulnerable to trafficking schemes (Burke et al., 2014). It is crucial to explore how this lack of digital skills plays a role in increasing the vulnerability of people. This paper aims to understand the tactics

that are used by human traffickers in the Mbeya region of Tanzania to win the victims, the need for specific interventions, and awareness among the community.

2. Materials and Methodology

2.1 Study Area and Location

The descriptive research design was used in this study and the qualitative data were collected from individuals who were affected by the phenomenon and stakeholders in the Mbeya region. A qualitative research method was employed in this study involving 35 participants, 18 victims, 8 community leaders and 9 law enforcement officers. The interviews were designed to get information on how the traffickers operate on social media platforms. The participants discussed the activities of the traffickers on social media and the methods, and channels that the traffickers use to contact potential victims.

2.2 Data Collection and Sampling

Primary data were collected in the Mbeya Urban district in the Mbeya region in December 2024. The right sample size was achieved through the use of a multi-stage sampling technique. However, the purposive sampling techniques were acknowledged to obtain the required number of 35 respondents including 18 Victims, 8 community leaders and 9 law enforcers. Data were collected through questionnaires, face-to-face interviews and focus group discussions (FGD). The interviews and FGD were conducted with the leaders and experienced persons in the district. The principal areas of concern were the individual's demographic profile, the social media platform uptake, the tactics and or methods used by traffickers, and the manipulations used. The purpose of the study was to describe the author's perceptions of the responses that they got from the law enforcer and monitoring institutions as well as feedback from the media platforms when the cases are reported to them hence the questions that were asked of the respondents.

2.3. Analytical technique

This was a cross-sectional study, and therefore descriptive statistics such as means, median, standard deviation and percentages were used to compare the results with the particular objectives. However, due to the nature of the questionnaire and how the interviews were conducted the thematic analysis was also involved to capture all the important information including the manipulative techniques and responses from the platform operators.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Results

Table 1 presents the descriptive results of the respondents about demographic characteristics, platforms used, recruitment tactics, and platforms' consideration. The age distribution of the respondents showed that of the 35 respondents, 50 % were within the age bracket of 18-24 years, 30 % were between 25-34 years and the remaining 20 % were over 35 years of age. This shows that the majority of the respondents were from 18 to 24 years of age and are considered to be the

most vulnerable group. Additionally, among the respondents, the majority 60% and 50% were female and male respectively. This accounts for the fact that the majority of the respondents involved in this study were female individuals.

Table 1: Summary of the Findings

Particular Items	Response	Rank (%)
Demographic Data		
Age 18-24 years	17	50
Age 25-34 years	10	30
Age 35 years and older	7	20
Female	21	60
Male	14	40
Recruitment Tactics		
Fake Job Offers	9	26
Emotional Manipulation	13	37
Social Proof	13	37
Platforms Assessment		
Sluggish Response to Reports	28	80
Inadequate Monitoring	26	75
Insufficient Awareness	17	50

Figure 1, indicates the three major types of the identified social media platforms identified by the respondents to be used by the human traffickers in the study region. Among these, Facebook is the most popular site accounting for 40%, while the second most popular site is WhatsApp with a usage rate of 30%, then comes Instagram with 20% and the least popular is Telegram with 10%.

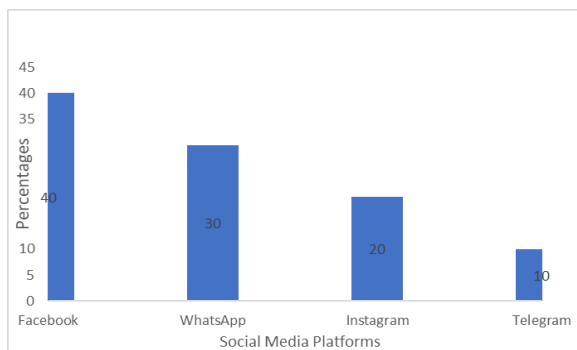


Figure 1: Type of social media Platforms

In line with the recruitment tactics, the traffickers in the study area pointed to fake job adverts, emotional manipulation and social proof as the known recruitment tactics used by the traffickers. therefore, Figure 2 presents the ranking of these tactics according to their importance as pointed out by the respondents. Based on the current findings, it proves the involvement of social media in the ticking business. This finding goes in line with previous findings by (Motseki and Mofokeng 2022; Sundani, 2023).



Figure 2: Recruitment tactics by percentages

3.2. Discussion

The present study reveals that social media plays an important role in human trafficking in the Mbeya region. This shows that the traffickers' strategies are well aligned with the platform features and according to the potential targets' demographics. The updated strategies of the traffickers and the slow response of social media companies are significant problems in the fight against trafficking.

3.2.1 Demographic characteristics

The current findings show that young adults (18-24 years) form the greater part and are 50% of the respondents. This conforms with Clawson and Dutch (2008) who stated that individuals at a young age are easily trafficked for various reasons including economic instability, joblessness and naiveness. The high percentage of young respondents shows the need for early intervention and preventive measures in their homes, institutions of learning, and other social organizations. The people in the middle age of 25 to 34 years form 30 % of the total sample and are often the focus of attention since they are actively seeking jobs and need to earn their livelihood. These

current findings are in line with the work done by Farrell et al. (2019) where the authors established that individuals at this age are most likely to fall for fake job adverts and emotional blackmail. Although the oldest group of adults (35 years and older) is also involved in trafficking, they were the smallest group, comprising 20% only. According to Zimmerman et al. (2003), such a group may be easily vulnerable to social proofing techniques which include the use of community influence and social relations.

Based on the findings, 60 % of the respondents were female, and 40 % were male. To this far it brings out that the majority of the respondents and participants in this study are females and the results of this study would be highly influenced by female individuals. This is consistent with the global trends of human trafficking where women are mostly affected (UNODC, 2020). Further research also shows that emotional manipulation and false job advertisements such as modelling or domestic service are directed mainly at women (Hodge, 2014). Quite similarly, labour trafficking and fake job adverts target mainly men who form a large percentage of the participants in the construction, agricultural and cleaning industries. The Mbeya region is productive in agricultural activities especially in rice, and maize farming, requiring a higher number of labourers, which falls under the vulnerable group. This was also noted by Bales (2007) who produced a similar finding. Therefore, social proof techniques may also be more common in males as well as informal networks and community references.

3.2.2 Traffickers' recruitment tactics

Findings show that fake job ads target the job-seeking activities of young adults (18-24 years) and adults (25-34 years). Fake job ads are one of the most common ruses to target females where they are lured with modelling or entertainment job opportunities which they wish to achieve or have a better life (Hodge, 2014; Doe, 2020). The sectors that demand physical labour include construction and agriculture and these are sectors that mainly offer opportunities to men in line with Bales (2007). Emotional manipulation targets the 18-24 years of age persons who are eager and sensitive groups seeking better life chances. Female victims are particularly vulnerable to the 'grooming' techniques which break down victims' emotional and relational barriers, create dependency and establish trust that is later exploited by the traffickers. This tactic is to isolate the victims from their families and friends, thus increasing the chances of the victims not being able to escape or even recognize that they are being deceived. The respondents also reported the use of social proof as another type of trafficking technique. This involves the use of community trust (Jones & Chen, 2018), which is equally applicable irrespective of the gender of the victims and especially so for those over 35 years of age and belonging to the community. This tactic is where the traffickers present their offers by using informal networks and community referrals, with fake success stories and testimonies (Bales, 2007). This makes it easy for people to depend on the community and makes social proof a strong recruitment tool.

3.2.3 Social Media Platforms used by the traffickers

The findings of this study show that traffickers most often operate through Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram and Telegram with the former being the most commonly used channel (Figure 1). This trend indicates a major concern since each of the platforms has specific features that the traffickers can utilize. This is because through creating fake profiles and groups, traffickers can build the victims' trust and easily reel them in through the community. These findings are in line with Kirk and Okada (2022) who found out that social media platforms are ideal platforms for trafficking for and against the actors due to their anonymity and the ability to control social interactions. Encrypted messaging services like WhatsApp also enable the trafficker to chat privately with the prospect which allows the trafficker to groom the prospect while keeping him or her away from friends and family. Similarly, traffickers often use visual-based sites such as Instagram where they display glamorous lifestyles that may attract potential victims and Telegram which is an encrypted messaging application which makes it hard to detect. In the same manner, Baker et al. (2023) pointed out that the appearance of platforms such as Instagram increases the probability of the users' being exploited especially the young women, through the presentation of unrealistic lifestyles. In addition, Smith and Wilson (2023) highlighted the problems that lie in the way that these sites are policed, indicating that the speed with which communication occurs on applications such as WhatsApp and Telegram makes it harder for the police to intercept conversations. These studies as a whole can be seen as highlighting the fact that there is a need for the development of a complex approach that would include the increase in the level of monitoring on the part of social media companies and the enhancement of the cooperation between the law enforcement agencies to prevent human trafficking.

4. Conclusion and recommendations

Human traffickers have become prolific in the use of social media to get their victims in the Mbeya Region of Tanzania. It is thus important to know their tactics to be in a position to design efficient preventive and interventive measures. This study therefore calls for a combination of community education, improved monitoring by social media companies, and improved coordination with the police to combat human trafficking.

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