

# The Digital Stroll: Changing Patterns and Work Spaces of Commercial Sex in Nigeria

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## Abstract

This paper examines how digital technologies have impacted on the nature and operations of commercial sex (prostitution) in Nigeria. Data was obtained primarily from interviews with purposively sample 72 participants and two sex industry web platforms in Port Harcourt and adopted a theoretical framework founded on Leotard's theory of postmodernism. It was discovered that most online sex workers operate with reduced risk and make profits above conventional outdoor workers. Notwithstanding the advantages of Internet-promoted sex work; there are perils that emerge online and policing the trade has become a herculean task. It was recommended among others that further research should focus on addressing domestic social, economic and political variables that make individuals to choose the profession and the development of appropriate digital technologies for policing the sector based on Nigeria sex work policy.

**Key Words:** Commercial Sex, Work, Digital Stroll, ICT, Nigeria, Structure and Organization

## 1. Background: Context of the Study

*The commercial sex public embarrassment linked to the former Governor of the state of New York, Spitzer Eliot, demystifies the internal operations of contemporary prostitution: sending message to check in the customers, digital money payments, online portal showcasing flashy pictures, charges and ratings. Indeed, whores and tour guards can now take advantage of novel ways of publicity to establish an identity for themselves and stroll for clients (CNBC, 2008; Weitzer, 2009)*

Globally, technology is the driver of comfort; since the advent of technology and its continual progression, life has become less difficult that almost anything ranging from clothes, electronics, food, furniture, and even houses can be bought using digital technology by just a click on any internet linked device (Jones, 2015 p.562). In fact, almost every sector of human society ranging from banking, culture, education, religion, transportation and a host of others are affected by the irresistible wave of digital transformation. The commercial sex industry is not immune to these profound impacts of digital technology as the structure and organization of sex business has been largely altered. Global Network of Sex Works Projects (GNSWP, 2017) captures clearly these changes:

Technology is transforming sex work by making it easier and secure for participants to work flexible hours and manage their own trade without the need for pimps. Through ICT, sex workers are able to: organize; develop ways to alert each other of violent clients; increase their safety through 'blacklists' published online; use screening methods to avert police and other security agents; do customers background checks before booking a client; and use online payment platforms (2017 p.2)

In Nigeria for example, despite legal and institutional structures at the three levels of government deployed to curb the trade, transactional sex has remained not only resilient but has experienced changes in pattern, forms and mode of operation due partly to the influence of internet and other related digital technology. Apart from providing new medium of advertising, the world-wide web has radically altered commercial work spaces and resulted in the development of unusual models of prostitution (like video sex) that is exclusively an online activity. Emene (2012) captures succinctly the effect of digital technology on the organization and structure of sex business in Port Harcourt, Nigeria thus:

On Port Harcourt the nation's oil city, prostitution has assumed the Italian like criminal syndicate with various networks that have beaten police counter strategies: scientific progress specifically information communication technology (ICT) have accentuated and introduce innovations to the phenomenon; before arriving Port Harcourt from Abuja, Lagos, Kano, or any foreign destination clients can browse through the internet and arrange sexual fixes with Port Harcourt sex workers (2012 p.20)

In a related development, Udeh, et al. (2019) observed thus:

21<sup>st</sup> century developments in communication technologies have transformed transactional sex business through internet portals like Face book, Imo, Twoo, BBM etc., making photo-electronic sex effortless. These developments; wherein individuals offer money not only to see but also to select from a variety of naked feminine photographs constitutes novelties that have expanded the scope of sexual rights and the dawn of a new order in the commercial sex world. (2019 p. 2)

Studies on prostitution reveal that the organization and provision of erotic services are connected to diverse fields of applied sciences. While the revolution in transportation moved sex work from the central district to the outskirts, mobile communication technology opened up business opportunities for tour guards. Technological advances have facilitated increased movement and invisibility of both prostitutes and clients. The growth of web courtship and sensual meeting environment and their relatively cheaper running expenses have rendered conventional businesses like cathouses infamous, thus making internet tour guards a preferred option. Nevertheless, the conventional dictum that transactional sex is the earliest occupation globally obscures major transformations that the sector has experienced in recent times. This is more pronounced in most African societies where sex work is criminalized and where open discussions on sexual matters and desire are culturally prohibited (Fajewonyomi, et al., 2007; Izugbara, 2004). No wonder, despite the visibility and preponderance of online sex trade it has captivated only few African scholars. In

tandem with the abstract of this paper, an attempt was made to examine how technologies have impacted on the nature and operation of sex transactions and its consequences for policies on the industry in Nigeria. It is therefore organized into eight sections. The first part dwells on the disparate philosophy on commercial sex globally, followed by an x-ray of online sexual commerce and its benefits. The third section direct attention to Leotard's theory of Postmodernism as the adopted approach to the study. The fourth, fifth and sixth part deals with the issues of methodology, results and discussions respectively. The seventh and eighth sections of this paper, concludes and make recommendations inclusive future research areas.

## **2. Disparate Philosophy on Commercial Sex**

The performance of sexual acts in return for money and or material and non-material gifts (CS) is a universal social problem documented by a long tradition of the social sciences. It has gained prominence globally and its prevalence in sub-Saharan Africa is within the range of 0.7% and 4.3 % (Gangul, et al., 2014 p. 29). Apart from being gender neutral and composed of juveniles, youths and adults, the rise of sexual commerce in Nigeria have been attributed to socio-economic factors amongst which are, broken homes, child rearing practices, peer group influence, male child preference, forced marriage, poverty, unemployment and a host of others (Oyeoku, 2012 p. 6).

The content of sex trade has different interpretations driven by philosophical and normative orientations, and consequently, it has generated continuous interest over the appropriate modality for controlling the contentious behaviour (Nkala, 2014 p. 67). Also, recognizing the paradigms change associated with the contemporary world, deliberations on commercial sex practices have stepped up as the different tiers of government have come up with varied statutory reactions. The policy reactions are two- fold; legalization and criminalization of the sex- sector of which Nigeria has elected to follow the path of decriminalization as a strategy of curbing it (Kangiwa, 2015 p. 77).

The conceptualization of prostitution as work has culminated to its legalization/decriminalization in several countries informed by the principles of equality and emancipation of women associated with most liberal government. Commercial sex policy varies and has been accorded official recognition by some countries with stipulated conditions that must be adhered to in its organization (Menon, 2012). Some countries in this category are Holland, Germany and Sweden. While Holland and Germany have adopted a policy that approve the licensing of cathouses with a condition to operate in areas that would not compromise public order, by contrast the Swedish government gave official stamp to commercial sex by legislatively accepting it as abuse in a patriarchal setting. The legislation not only abhors the arrest; repudiates the use of the institutions of social control to remote women but also calls for the utilization of the law to sanction the male folk considered to be the principal offenders (Ekberg and Walhberg, 2011).

Nigeria's sex workers and law makers are not excluded in the clamor for decriminalization as social groups; human right activist and law makers have called for its full decriminalization. For example, protesting commercial sex workers littered Lagos city under the platform of Nigeria Association of prostitutes: adorned in shirts demanding for the recognition of their rights to practice. Representing the group, 48 years old Patoo Abraham declared:

We are disturbed by our continuous suffering in secrecy, and so our desire is to be permitted to practice our trade with dignity like other people. The societal rejection and stigmatization should stop. Our work is legitimate and not ashawo as we are being labeled

Responding to a motion on the menace and the trade in human persons in Nigeria, erstwhile head of the Senate, David Mark said:

Bringing a stop to commercial sex is not easy; the leadership of the Federal Capital Territory has made frantic efforts to end it without success. The situation is compounded by the vehement opposition from their well-organized association and hired attorney (Sahara Reporters, 2011)

Decriminalization entails the abrogation of legislations that criminalize commercial sex in all ramifications. There are countless merits of decriminalization, and they include the promotion of secure and healthy working contexts and lessening of stigmatization of labor in the transactional sex sector (West, 2000). For example, reports of studies on legal brothels reveal that the licensed brothels provide the safest and crime free work place for providing commoditized sexual services. This is so because the prerequisites for operating registered cathouses are the installation of security alert, surveillance and listening gadgets which together can help in abating abuse by customers and ensuring effective police protective intervention (Daalder, 2004 p. 30; Sulvian, 2008).

The above submission is not meant to romanticize legalization policy. The reality is that individuals differ in their evaluation of approved cathouses particularly, their experiences with operators and customers, and in their perception of the normative principles regulating conduct. Furthermore, there are variations in the capability of nations to meet up with the requirements for the operations of licensed brothels. For example, underdeveloped countries characterized by poverty, low level of technology and educational deficits are unlikely to possess the economic, political and technological clout to provide the infrastructure and security apparatus required compared to developed countries (Weitzer, 2010 p.23). In a related development, Raymond (2004) believes that legalization of sexual mercantilism can help in reducing crime and contributing to the global efforts at combating sexually related ailments since workers are expected to undergo routine health test. Commercial sex work is a fundamental right; a non-destructive conduct and legislations against it merely aggravate the hazards associated with the profession (Nwankama, 2015 p. 56). However, proponents of criminalization policy are not comfortable with the expunging of commercial sex from the criminal codes of some nations. They believe that the policy would only aggravate the situation. Raymond (2003) pointed out:

Instead of dealing with the demand for sex from women by men, legalization policy simply amounts to government profiteering from the illicit trade (Raymond, 2003).

The policy therefore gives a legislative cover to a vulgar industry that portrays sex merchandise as normal. It inculcates in the mind of the male folk, the perception that ladies are sex tools and commoditization of sex an inoffensive source of thrill and excitement (Raymond, 2003). In addition, scholars have identified other problems associated with legalization. Some are: an increase in the oppression and abuse of female prostitutes in regulated areas (Sulvian, 2004); the encouragement of men demand for sex which leads to proliferation of sex trade (Raymond, 2003 p.223) and the migration of sex merchants into areas where it is approved (Farley, 2007 p. 118). In any case, women sex traders are opposed to its legalization (p. 325). As the debate rolls on, Weitzer (2010) declared:

No serious academic has claimed that decriminalization is a perfect policy, but a plethora of research works indicates that it is has the potential of reducing harm, so government policies on sex work should be founded on diverse paradigm informed by evidence based research (Weitzer, 2010 p. 25)

### **3. Online Sex Work in Nigeria and Its Benefits**

Sex work online can be taken to mean the utilization of the world-wide web to actually perform erotic acts. A typical example is a video frigging show performed for a client or a cam-girl that Skype's with a client for

an agreed value. However, using the web for advertising erotic activities that are carried out in the physical environment can also be classified as online sex work (Jones, 2015 p. 561)

The internet is a novelty that is useful to sex workers immensely. Although most activities that take place in conventional sex business have remained static; the structure and operations of the trade have clearly transformed. Sex workers in Nigeria now make use of platforms such as WhatsApp, Twitter, Face book, Eskimi, Instagram and Blackberry Messenger to attract clients but in coded forms. They have their terms and condition which you either accept or decline. On their pages, they make use of raunchy pictures and lascivious languages to advertise themselves to prospective customers (Onolinua and Kareem, 2018). For instance, during an interview with a participant who identified himself simply as Ibinabo, explained how he had engaged with at least three whores in Port Harcourt who he met on a particular mobile application. He said:

*After my previous relationship collapsed, I resolved to take my business more seriously but bodi no be stone. So once in a while when I need to have an erotic encounter, I drive down to Birabi Street to scout for a woman for the night. I did that for sometimes until a pal of mine informed of a mobile system whereby I can easily get a woman online. We would do all the negotiation online; I would discuss all I want from her. If the terms are acceptable to her, she moves in to my apartment and we have sex. Ever since I was introduced to the application, I never returned to Birabi again*

The above submission shows that sex workers have now integrated new modes into the operation of their businesses. It is no longer limited to a particular locale but has become increasingly networked across traditional borders (Wably, 2012 p.168). Thus, the label of the prostitute as a young female central district whore that provides sexual service for survival becomes outdated. Another respondent explaining how to identify sex workers online said:

*I am sure that if you click in to any of the platforms, you will identify a whore through her bios. You will see such phrases as ‘hook up only’ It indicates that she is a commercial sex worker. Personal experience has also shown that, if you see bios like ‘go straight to the point, I am not here for long talk’, don’t ask me JAMB questions, say what you want’, I am a masseuse,’ I can offer happy hour,’ Hook up only,’ and only serious men should message shows that the she is a prostitute*

The stroll from the streets to online work spaces can be linked to the numerous benefits obtained from online transactional sex. Some of the benefits include promoting physical safety, improved visibility, client anonymity, and building reputation (Feldman, 2014). Also, the increasingly globally networked workplace creates ample opportunities for participants increased earnings (Minichiello, et al., 2013). Explaining the benefits of online work environment, a participant who simply introduced herself as Chioma said:

*I charge N30, 000 per night inclusive my transport fare, however if the client will sort out my transportation, the sexual fee will be N20, 000 for a night. When I was a street walker, I was almost held hostage and on many occasions, I have been disgraced and embarrassed by clients who declined to pay after I had ‘serviced’ them. Nonetheless all is now history owing to the various online mobile applications I registered to. Apart from physical sex, online mobile application enables me to offer virtual sex to customers lack the financial clout to pay for physical sex. After negotiation, and if my account is credited, we engage in a video chat: we go nude and masturbate until they feel relieved*

Online work environment has also positively impacted on worker’s antagonistic relations with agents of social control and would likely galvanize sex workers into collective action (Minichiello, et al. 2013;

Feldman, 2014). It has created more awareness on the existence of many sex services and helped in the all-inclusive dissemination of information that was hitherto difficult with Newspapers and Magazines.

Another area that has been revolutionized by the application of digital technology is public awareness of male-whores and tour guards. Digitalization has affirmed the reality of their existence, rise in number and the disparate services they provide. For example, research applying digital technology indicates that Port Harcourt city has the highest male involvement in the profession compared to other cities. Adebajo et al., (2013) reports that as at 2009, the city was estimated to have the highest homosexual sex workers (723) followed by Lagos (620) and Kano city with 353 (2013 p.83).

Having presented the disparate philosophy and the benefits of online sex work in Nigeria, subsequent section presents the assumptions of Leotard's theory of postmodernism which is the adopted theoretical framework in the write up of this paper.

#### **4. Leotard's Theory of Postmodernism**

Postmodernism refers to an ideological movement that propped up in the mid- to late 20th century affecting various fields of study (Calinescu, 1987). A major stand of Post-modern theorist is that social reality can be comprehended and interpreted as a product of change, and a key driver of the change is the new forms of technology that has enveloped human societies.

One of the prominent postmodernist is Jean-Francois Lyotard (1927-1998) whose contributions is best exemplified in his work '*The Postmodern Condition*' (1979). For him, human society has entered a new and distinctive phase and relates this change to technology. Lyotard contends that the present emphasis on digital technologies has enhanced manufacturing, eased communication, and greater inter-connectivity of human societies into a global community.

The assumptions of the theory are twofold. First, knowledge has been compartmentalized into disparate language-games applicable to particular aspect of social life. This is so because truth ceases to be the central focus of research as literary language- games becomes unpopular. These new forms of knowledge are generally associated with social categories that were long despised such as prostitutes, minorities, and albinos.

Second, away from uncovering the truth, knowledge is recognized and measured in terms of its provision of utility in an efficient way. Away from moral humanity, efforts are directed towards the means through which activities can be carried out efficiently (Lyotard 1979 cited Smart, 1992 p. 456). In tertiary institutions for instance, scholars ponder more on the utility status of a phenomenon instead of its quality of truth. Studies are thus directed towards generating commoditized knowledge.

According to Lyotard (1992 p.462), the thrust of the approach is the compactness and commercial quality of equipment and computerization which characterize current production systems. Postmodern advances in sciences are preoccupied with messages, dialect and data preservation. Ideas that are difficult to convert into computer adopted forms tends to get loss or jettisoned. Thus, on a larger scale, trade activities revolve around information technology. Everyday human activities is censored and regulated more often by computerized machines; and the firm grip of ideas becomes the primary basis of supremacy (Haralambos, et al., 2002 p. 1071). Knowledge is not an end itself but something predicated on producing and distributing ideas that is commoditized. Grand frameworks of morality, equity and development have become outmoded and language-games directed towards efficiency and marketability instead of fulfilling the ultimate goal of human existence.

Therefore, commercial sex as the acclaimed earliest global occupation follows consumption pattern. As most businesses are going digital, locating their customers and making transactions less cumbersome, so also are sex workers. The stroll by sex workers into the digital space to attract clients is not an aberration,

rather, an indication of their response to contemporary social reality. However, the rise of internet facilitated sex work does not amount to the total disappearance of street prostitution but a reflection of growth in the industry. To affirm Leotard's theoretical propositions, the subsequent two sections concentrate on the method and process of data collection, the results and discussion.

## 5. Methodology

This study explores how digital technology impacts on the commercial sex sector in Nigeria. Data was obtained from survey through online interviews with purposively sample 72 participants consisting of 50 online based sex workers, 20 online commercial sex clients and individuals representing two web platforms.

We made efforts to create rapport with the administrators of some websites that post advert materials. The two reputable website in Nigeria contacted were Nairaland Romance (NLR) and Speakers Palace (SP). The researchers were lucky to garner assistance from the managers of these web platforms who agreed to freely advertise the study through mail-outs and fliers popping up on their sites. Interview protocol form was emailed to sample participants and interview conducted using video call. The support obviously impacted positively on the responses. Data from interview was transcribed and summarized and data was analyzed using simple percentage

**Table 2 Socio-demographics of respondents**

Gender	Rpd	%	S/O	Rpd	%	Age	Rpd	%	Edu	Rpd	%
Male	15	21	Straight	42	58	18-24	31	43	PG	11	15
Female	54	75	Bisexual	18	25	25-34	21	29	Degree	16	22
Intersex	3	4	Lesbian	12	17	35-44	18	25	Dip	24	33
						45-54	2	3	SSCE	21	30
Total	72	100		72	100		72	100		72	100

Source: Researcher's online interview

In the survey as shown in Table 2, 75% (54) of respondents were women, 21% (15) male, 4% (3) transgender. Though generality of participants were women but male participation was appreciable. Also, interview was conducted amongst 20 online sex clients to ascertain their view on the topic.

From the information above, the composition of respondents was diverse in terms of gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion and education. While 58 % (42) of female participant agreed that they were heterosexuals and 25% (18) were bisexual, only 17% (12) identified as gay. Above 50% of respondents were between the age of 18 and 52: 72%, (18) were aged 35-44; 25%, (2) were 45-54; 3%. Respondents were comparatively educated: 15% (11) were qualified to postgraduate degree level; 22% (16) had a bachelor degree or Higher National Diploma; 33% (24) possessed Diploma and NCE 30% (21) possess SSCE

## 6. Results

The largest group of respondents 72% (52) entered the profession when they were aged 18-34; 25% (18) were aged 35-44; and 3% (2) were aged 45-54. The expansion of internet facilitated commercial sex attenuated soliciting in physical spaces thereby making internet marketing the most viable alternative for all classes of prostitutes. Responding to questions on how the internet has affected their business positively; Belema, (27), Bidemi (34) and Iniobong (24) specialized in providing video sex, tour guard services and massage to masturbation services all said that the success of their business depended on the internet. Two other participants, Fatima (27) and Enogie (26) insisted it is the number one important thing to their working

life. The opinion of many participants is that they would simply stop working in the sector in the absence of internet. The reasons adduced to rationalize their stand are that traditional forms of soliciting for customers have declined and street/brothel sex working has become increasingly unpopular.

## **7. Discussion**

The above results indicate that commercial sex though an old profession; it has remained a social problem to date as many youths between ages 18-34 dominate the trade and the prospect of ending it is gleam considering the current socio-economic and political realities. It follows therefore, that if the government cannot address the issues of poverty, unemployment, corruption and cultural inhibitions which are at the root of commercial sex, then it must allow the trade to operate without any form of restriction.

The conventional view that majority of whores are made up of the uneducated and school drop-outs has been proved wrong by the outcomes of the study. Rather, the more educated sex workers have a higher tendency of migrating from the street to online workspaces and thus creating class distinction amongst them. The trend may be linked to the current high level of unemployment which has increased graduates drift into prostitution. In addition, the use of digital applications requires some education.

This study has moved beyond emphasizing the advantages of online sex work that characterize other works to identifying new dangers that have propped up in web workspaces. Going by this departure, it is imperative that criminological investigation should be directed towards tackling online criminality to correspond with the stroll to online work environment. This will entail a change in strategies by police to include using chat rooms to monitor the commercial sex industry.

Finally, the struggles to reform the sector is on-going and should be supported by the government.

## **8. Conclusion**

The study examines how digital technologies have impacted on the structure and organization of commercial sex work and its consequences for policies on the industry in Nigeria. Information gathered and analyzed shows that the impact is unprecedented. It has radically transformed the work environment, expanded the market for sex through improved advertising, nurtured business relationships devoid of pimps, reduced confrontations with the police and premeditated hostilities from criminal elements. Nevertheless, the stroll online has not made the industry perfect as the hazards of the occupation have not been absolutely obliterated, and for now internet facilitated sex work still present new challenges such as online harassment, client negative reviews, capping, financial scam, threat of virus and difficulty in cracking down criminality.

## **9. Recommendations and Future Action Areas**

We recommend research needs to address other specific areas: how local issues (poverty, inequality, corruption, cultural inhibitions and unemployment) shape the stroll either online or offline; issues related to danger and privacy and the responses of police to online sex work. No doubt, if these issues are tackled, this study would assist the government, NGOs and victim rights movements in providing help to whores that have resolved to exit the profession. Furthermore, awareness of the risks that online sex work poses could help them device ways of operating safer.

The areas to be tackled that could likely influence legislation in the sex industry is:

1. Determining the influence of local issues on the stroll into online workspaces.
2. Investigating how legal instruments frame the stroll of many women from outdoor to indoor commercial sex and averting arrest.
3. Researching the influence of socio- economic and political situations on individual's choice of commercial sex online.



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