

Human trafficking in nairaland digital community: A corpus-assisted critical discourse study

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Ayo Osisanwo 

Institute of English Studies, Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg, Germany
Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria

Abstract

Human trafficking in Nigeria as a topical issue has enjoyed more sociological interrogation with very scant attention in linguistics and discourse. This paper applies a corpus-assisted critical discourse study to examine representative posts on human trafficking in Nigeria (2019 to 2022) retrieved from the *Nairaland* digital community. Using the *Sketch Engine* corpus tool and social actors representation model, this paper investigates how different constructions were deployed by participants to represent human trafficking, human traffickers and traffick victims in Nigeria. Findings suggest four constructions oriented to negativity: prostitution/commodification of sex, abuse of underage for sexual satisfaction, maltreatment of others for huge labour, dismembering of humans for occultism and health-assurance. Participants deployed role allocation, nominalisation, and others to negatively evaluate human traffickers, especially as economic usurpers, exploiters, and fraudsters, while the traffick-victims were represented as naïve, non-violent, armless, defenceless and (in)active recipients of the activities of the human traffickers. The dominant negative constructs manifested implicitly and explicitly through tagging, negative comparison, appeal to sentimentalities, and expression of detest, while the positive constructs of victims manifested through pity and appeal to humanity. Online participants attack the political class, and declare their ideological stances on human traffickers in Nigeria, making efforts to project suppressed stances.

Keywords

Corpus-assisted critical discourse study, digital communities, discourse construction, human trafficking, human traffickers, victims of trafficking in Nigeria

Corresponding author:

Ayo Osisanwo, Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, 200284, Nigeria.
Email: ayosisdelexus@yahoo.com

Introduction

Human trafficking, including the use of humans for forced labour and prostitution, is a criminal activity and security issue which has become a topical issue in news headlines and online discourses within and outside Nigeria. Human Trafficking has been defined as ‘the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of persons by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, use of power or position of vulnerability or giving payments or benefits for control of another person’ (*The UN Transnational Organised Crime Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons*, 2003; United Nations, 2003). Trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and forced labour violates the fundamental rights of all persons to life, liberty, and security of the person; freedom of movement and residence; freedom from torture or cruel inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; the right to an adequate standard of living; and freedom from slavery in all its forms (United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights). To curb the menace created by trafficking in persons and associated matters, the Nigerian government under the watch of former President Olusegun Obasanjo, established the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and Other Related Matters (NAPTIP), following the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act of 2003. The NAPTIP Act of 2003, as amended in 2005, and enacted in 2015 defines trafficking as: ‘All acts and attempted acts involved in the recruitment, transportation within or across Nigerian borders, purchase, sale, transfer, receipt or harbouring of a person involving the use of deception, coercion or debt bondage for the purpose of placing or holding the person whether for or not in voluntary servitude (domestic, sexual or reproductive) in force or bonded labour, or in slavery-like conditions’.

Almost all nation-states in the African continent have been associated with engaging in a form of trafficking, either as nation-states of origin, transit and or destination (Allais, 2006). The top five countries of origin for trafficking victims were Nigeria, Vietnam, Albania, Romania, and China (US Department of State, 2012). Nigeria had the highest number of people living in ‘modern slavery’ in Africa (Global Slavery Index, 2013). According to Craig (2012), in Italy alone, the United Nations estimates over 15000 Nigerians are entrapped, mostly against their will into the country’s street prostitution each year, making Nigeria the largest national group trafficked for the Italian sex trade. Human traffickers exploit domestic and foreign victims in Nigeria, and traffickers exploit victims from Nigeria abroad. Internal trafficking is prevalent with Nigerian perpetrators recruiting victims from rural areas, especially the country’s southern region, for exploitation in sex trafficking and forced labour in domestic work (US Department of State, 2023). The prevalence of human trafficking in Nigeria has been blamed on some factors including poverty, bad governance, economic crises, unemployment, crime, corruption, and violence which are projected as part of the vicious circle which adversely affects the development of the Nigerian society. Unfortunately, the conditions contribute heavily to emigration pressure between 2020 and 2024. Corruption facilitates illegal emigration such that the organised trafficking network specialises in forging and selling travel documents to potential human trafficking victims as well as other Nigerians who may not be aware of legal procedures for the issuance of passports and visas (Olukoshi, 2001).

Human trafficking in Nigeria is multidimensional, comprising domestic and international. Whereas domestic is trafficking within Nigeria from rural to urban communities, international is trafficking from Nigeria overseas, especially Italy. Nigerians are notoriously identified with two different kinds of trafficking: internal and external trafficking. While internal trafficking is in the form of domestic servitude and street begging, external trafficking is mostly about sex trafficking and domestic labour (Iyanda and Nwogwugwu, 2016). According to Badejo (2016), Nigerian women and children are taken from Nigeria to other West and Central African countries, as well as to South Africa, where they are exploited; they are subjected to sex trafficking throughout Europe, and are also recruited and transported to destinations in North Africa, the Middle East and Central Asia.

Trafficking in human beings is an issue of concern for many international and national organisations, government and interest groups and human rights activists with political, social, and economic consequences. Human trafficking constitutes a cruel deviation from societal norms; and this crime often results in both short- and long-term physical and psychological harm to its victims (Nkememena, 2009). Despite the constitutional provisions outlawing slavery and forced labour in Section 34(1) of the 1999 constitution, and Sections 223-225 of the criminal code which provide sanctions against whoever trades in prostitution or facilitates the transport of human beings within or outside Nigeria for commercial purposes, human trafficking issue is the third most common crime in Nigeria. Hence, the media which holds a position as a gatekeeper plays a crucial role in shaping public perception of human trafficking victims, as the images and stories presented in the media can create expectations of what trafficking is and how it affects victims (Cho and Lee, 2017). The media sense referenced by Cho and Lee (2017) is the traditional media. However, as the traditional media plays this role, social media has been complementing the traditional with more vigour, giving descriptions of the situation without restriction. Participants on social media, including Nairaland virtual community, have embraced the platform to air their views and self-express on human trafficking in Nigeria.

Thus, this study which conceives discourse written language, and different types of language used in different types of social situations (like news discourse, social media discourse, trafficking discourse) (Fairclough, 1992), sees discourse representations of news media, including those on social media and Nairaland today, as often characterised by subtle and not-so-subtle abuses of power, by socio-political influences, and the furtherance of human inequities in various socio-political contexts (Van Dijk, 1988).

Scholarly works on human trafficking in Nigeria have been undertaken from the sociological perspective (Osaghae, 1999; Tade, 2014; Tade and Aderinto, 2011, 2012), peace and security studies (Babatunde, 2014), communication and media studies (Adeyeye and Egbulefu, 2022; Cho and Lee, 2017; Koo, 2014; Olley et al., 2023; Rosas-Moreno and Lee, 2023; Sanford et al., 2016). The communication and media studies are more related to the current study. Koo (2014) examined how human trafficking victims and offenders are portrayed in three major newspapers from 2005 to 2012, and discovered that newspapers often portrayed victims as helpless and vulnerable, while offenders were portrayed as powerful and dangerous. Similarly, Sanford et al. (2016) examined U.S. newspaper articles on human trafficking and found that the media often framed human

trafficking as a problem that primarily affects women and children while the media used sensational language and images to depict human trafficking. The Nigeria-focussed studies are Adeyeye and Egbulefu (2022) and Olley et al. (2023). Adeyeye and Egbulefu (2022) examined newspaper coverage of human trafficking stories in Nigeria and discovered media reports infrequently report human trafficking activities, hindering members of the society from having expanded knowledge and understanding of salient and more complex issues surrounding human trafficking. Olley et al. (2023) examined the coverage of human trafficking in Nigerian online news and found that despite giving low prominence to human trafficking in the newspapers studied, the way the media portray human trafficking victims can perpetuate harmful stereotypes and contribute to victim blaming. However, existing studies have not sufficiently delved into the portrayal of human trafficking offenders and victims via social media. Studies on digital discourse on human trafficking in Nigeria in digital spaces are rare. Some of such digital studies carried out in other climes outside Nigeria have only dwelled on the use of social media digital space for the recruitment of victims (Council of Europe, 2022). Other studies (Raets and Janssens, 2021) have examined how perpetrators use social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, and messaging services (WhatsApp and Telegram) to increase their reach rather than the use of traditional or offline recruitment methods like word-of-mouth. Yet, scholars have not engaged the discourses about human trafficking in the digital space. This is one reason the current study is unique in giving direction in the description and or representation of human trafficking in Nigeria using discourses harvested from the digital space. A linguistic exploration of engagements among discourse participants in such digital communities, as engaged in the current study, promises to further categorise, unveil and reveal the implications of human trafficking in the Nigerian context.

Nairaland, which derives its name from the Nigerian currency (the naira), was founded in 2003 by Seun Osewa. Nairaland digital community is a popular Nigerian general-interest discussion web forum. The members of the community are Nigerians and expatriate Nigerians from elsewhere in the world. The forum is more topic-centred, discussing different issues that bother on Nigeria. The forum is an online community with over 3,185,851 registered members/accounts, covering over 7,927,501 topics as at August, 2024. Nonetheless, existing statistics shows that about 40% of Nigerians (almost 100 million) participate on Nairaland (*Alexa.com*), hence, it the largest online community in Africa, ahead of other popular Web forums. The largest age group of visitors on Nairaland are 25–34-year-olds, made up of 68.93% male and 31.07% female. The array of topics discussed in the community shows it particularly has a Nigerian identity. Existing studies like Chiluiwa and Odebunmi (2016), Lamidi (2016) and Osisanwo and Akano (2023) focussed on different topical issue on Nairaland rather than human trafficking. While Chiluiwa and Odebunmi (2016) examine stances taken by Nairalanders in representing the Boko Haram, Lamidi (2016) examines the construction of identity, and Osisanwo and Akano (2023) consider the focus on the discursive construction of the Yoruba nation secessionist agitation in selected Nigerian digital communities, including Nairaland. The study is particularly interested in how Nairalanders represent human trafficking within the Nigerian territory.

The growing prevalence of human trafficking, which has been further aggravated by the recent Japa syndrome among Nigerians, has necessitated this study. The study, therefore, seeks to examine the discourse strategies and tactics deployed by online participants in negotiating, discussing, and reporting human trafficking in the Nairaland virtual community. This is to track the severity, and complications which could help draw the attention of both local, national, and international communities to a clearer understanding of the heinous activities against humanity and, create an avenue to eradicating or minimising the menace. The following questions were formulated therefore for this study: What keywords define the focus on human trafficking? What sort of constructions emanate from the keywords? How are social actors (traffickers and victims) represented in the discourse? How are the dominant discourse strategies that motivated the representations of social actors discussed or realised?

Data, methodology, and theory

For the word corpus, posts on human trafficking in Nigeria within the period (2019–2022) under review were retrieved. The study retrieved and engaged a mini-specialised plain corpus of 98,097 words. Expressions such as ‘human trafficking in Nigeria’, ‘trafficking in Nigeria’ and ‘Nigerians and trafficking’ were inputted as search terms to retrieve posts, discussions, and engagements on the discourse, from Nairaland. The posts were copied, pasted, and saved in the MS Word textbox for ease of importation into the corpus tool for analysis. This ensured ease in coding the focus of the discourse. *SketchEngine* proved very useful in tracking the occurrences of keywords in order to track the data’s keyness. Keywords are individual words or tokens that frequently appear in the focus corpus. Keywords are used to identify what is specific to the focus. The identified and extracted words, based on the frequency of usage, define the constructions around human trafficking, using the Nairaland virtual community as data source. Secondly, for content analysis, insights were drawn from Van Leeuwen’s (2008) inventory in the representation of social actors. This is considered relevant in unveiling the tendencies and representations. Van Leeuwen ‘discusses how social actors can be defined and/or described in terms of the roles assigned to them either by reality or as represented in the given text’ (Osisanwo, 2016:345). The relevant aspects which have been applied in the analysis are as discussed. *Role allocation* – the representation of social actors through the roles they play. *Specification* is the representation of social actors as specific individuals that can be easily identified. While *aggregation* represents social actors with statistics by quantifying a group of participants, *collectivisation* uses generalised opinions, not statistically presented; it is not presented in percentages, surveys or number(s). *Association* represents social actors as a group of people who are associated with each other due to one common interest. *Nomination* identifies individuals ‘in terms of their unique identity’ (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 52). *Categorisation* identifies individuals ‘in terms of identities and functions they share with others’. *Functionalisation* involves the description of social actors in terms of the activity or something they do: ‘an occupation or role’ (Van Leeuwen, 2008: 42); *identification* obtains where social actors are defined in terms of what they are permanently. This study accounts for how participants have deployed the discourse tools to project their stances.

Analysis and Findings

Table 1 presents a list of 100 words that most prominently define trafficking in Nigeria by posts in the Nairaland virtual community.

Existing corpus-based studies have established that keywords mirror the content of a text, giving a general idea of the focus explored in the text, and that the notion relates to the main focus or topics in a corpus (Baker, 2006; Osisanwo, 2024). The keywords in Table 1 are ranked in order of their keyness score. The first 10 most frequently featured items and their relative frequency are traffick (1221.684), prostitution (521.63), paedophile (342.522), brothel (328.815), fashola (280.417), trafficker (275.344), Nigerian (272.955), sodomite (270.627), naptip (259.701), boko (243.611). The different keywords point to the direction of concentration in the representation of trafficking involving inhabitants of the territorial space called Nigeria. Other words that further define the corpus's direction are contained in 11–100. The keywords point to dominance in the human trafficking online discourse. Keyword focus and the word cloud of words associated with trafficking (See Figure 1), therefore, revealed four main constructions orienting to negativity on human trafficking in Nigeria: commodification of sex/prostitution; abuse of underage for labour and sexual satisfaction; abuse of others' huge labour for peanuts; and enforcement and dismembering of humans for occultism and self-health-assurance. Three other classes of representations emerge from the constructions: representation of human trafficking, human traffickers and traffick victims.

Table 1. Keywords from the corpus.

Item	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
1 Traffick	222	20,012	1617.663	0.32494	1221.684
2 Prostitution	307	202,647	2237.039	3.29047	521.63
3 Paedophile	105	76,162	765.111	1.23668	342.522
4 Brothel	106	83,269	772.3977	1.35208	328.815
5 Fashola	42	5848	306.0444	0.09496	280.417
6 Trafficker	96	95,101	699.53	1.5442	275.344
7 Nigerian	339	495,987	2470.215	8.05357	272.955
8 Sodomite	45	13,262	327.9047	0.21534	270.627
9 Naptip	36	859	262.3238	0.01395	259.701
10 Boko	77	80,511	561.0814	1.30729	243.611
11 Enugu	46	24,827	335.1915	0.40313	239.602
12 Traitor	137	201,239	998.2876	3.26761	234.156
13 Cherub	46	27,921	335.1915	0.45337	231.319
14 Nairaland	31	231	225.8899	0.00375	226.042
15 Underage	71	100,183	517.3607	1.62672	197.342
16 Tyrus	29	6799	211.3164	0.1104	191.207

(Continued)

Table 1. (Continued)

Item	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
17 Dey	47	54,904	342.4782	0.8915	181.59
18 Satanist	35	27,339	255.037	0.44392	177.321
19 Haram	62	98,684	451.7798	1.60238	173.987
20 Seun	25	3450	182.1693	0.05602	173.453
21 Iniquity	49	72,810	357.0518	1.18225	164.075
22 Nigeria	373	974,009	2717.966	15.81543	161.695
23 Prostitute	106	240,642	772.3977	3.90741	157.598
24 Mulatto	30	25,156	218.6031	0.40847	155.916
25 Ashawo	21	195	153.0222	0.00317	153.536
26 Deviant	45	70,706	327.9047	1.14809	153.115
27 Thee	230	624,513	1675.957	10.1405	150.528
28 Lagos	85	207,335	619.3756	3.36659	142.073
29 Paedophiles	20	2023	145.7354	0.03285	142.069
30 Ehi	20	3310	145.7354	0.05375	139.251
31 Libya	140	409,122	1020.148	6.6431	133.604
32 Igbo	30	40,178	218.6031	0.65239	132.9
33 Olaadegbu	18	0	131.1619	0	132.162
34 Luk	24	20,594	174.8825	0.33439	131.807
35 Almajiri	18	1110	131.1619	0.01802	129.822
36 Thou	270	886,776	1967.428	14.39899	127.828
37 Ghanian	18	2605	131.1619	0.0423	126.798
38 Thine	46	101,753	335.1915	1.65221	126.759
39 Bokoharm	17	2	123.8751	0.00003	124.871
40 Militant	17	170	123.8751	0.00276	124.531
41 Alhaja	17	738	123.8751	0.01198	123.396
42 Edo	39	81,519	284.1841	1.32366	122.73
43 Speaks	30	58,917	218.6031	0.95666	112.234
44 Mermaid	52	150,032	378.9121	2.43614	110.564
45 hbcp	15	68	109.3016	0.0011	110.18
46 Jibola	15	68	109.3016	0.0011	110.18
47 Ex-libyan	15	73	109.3016	0.00119	110.171
48 Re-enslavement	15	438	109.3016	0.00711	109.523
49 Bobrisky	15	964	109.3016	0.01565	108.602
50 Obamanation	15	1132	109.3016	0.01838	108.311
51 Covereth	15	1257	109.3016	0.02041	108.095
52 Abuja	32	77,060	233.1767	1.25126	104.02
53 Ezekiel	42	126,839	306.0444	2.05954	100.356
54 Queda	15	6567	109.3016	0.10663	99.673
55 Igbos	15	6598	109.3016	0.10713	99.628
56 Eze	18	20,206	131.1619	0.32809	99.512
57 Trafficking	131	544,338	954.567	8.83867	97.124
58 Shaitan	14	3834	102.0148	0.06225	96.978

(Continued)

Table I. (Continued)

Item	Frequency (focus)	Frequency (reference)	Relative frequency (focus)	Relative frequency (reference)	Score
59 Oloture	13	24	94.72802	0.00039	95.691
60 Lateefat	13	42	94.72802	0.00068	95.663
61 Wey	16	14,342	116.5883	0.23288	95.377
62 Ogun	17	19,431	123.8751	0.31551	94.925
63 Turncoat	15	10,601	109.3016	0.17213	94.103
64 Abeokuta	14	6192	102.0148	0.10054	93.604
65 Hausa	16	15,787	116.5883	0.25634	93.596
66 Ritually	16	16,384	116.5883	0.26603	92.879
67 Thy	174	785,567	1267.898	12.75561	92.246
68 n500	13	3118	94.72802	0.05063	91.115
69 Eurasian	30	89,723	218.6031	1.45687	89.383
70 Timdi	12	7	87.44125	0.00011	88.431
71 Mohammed	12	83	87.44125	0.00135	88.322
72 Molue	12	163	87.44125	0.00265	88.208
73 Pidgin	16	22,522	116.5883	0.3657	86.101
74 Freakish	15	18,813	109.3016	0.30548	84.492
75 Marshalls	15	19,191	109.3016	0.31161	84.096
76 Occultist	15	19,733	109.3016	0.32041	83.536
77 Bloodline	30	105,338	218.6031	1.71042	81.022
78 Satanism	15	24,610	109.3016	0.3996	78.809
79 Bankole	11	2742	80.15448	0.04452	77.695
80 Brutalise	15	26,850	109.3016	0.43598	76.813
81 Ikoyi	11	3822	80.15448	0.06206	76.412
82 Immorality	21	63,548	153.0222	1.03186	75.804
83 Gen	84	440,487	612.0888	7.15239	75.204
84 Debauchery	15	28,834	109.3016	0.46819	75.128
85 Wickedness	24	83,431	174.8825	1.35471	74.694
86 Buhari	28	107,670	204.0296	1.74829	74.603
87 Doubter	15	30,079	109.3016	0.48841	74.107
88 Swahili	16	36,154	116.5883	0.58705	74.092
89 Onitsha	11	6023	80.15448	0.0978	73.925
90 Is'lamic	10	0	72.86771	0	73.868
91 Sealest	10	77	72.86771	0.00125	73.775
92 Iyamu	10	293	72.86771	0.00476	73.518
93 Tabret	10	455	72.86771	0.00739	73.326
94 Sardius	10	819	72.86771	0.0133	72.898
95 Yoruba	16	41,285	116.5883	0.67036	70.397
96 Sanni	10	3126	72.86771	0.05076	70.299
97 Satan	95	546,076	692.2432	8.86689	70.26
98 Libyan	33	153,259	240.4634	2.48854	69.216
99 Naysayer	15	37,248	109.3016	0.60481	68.732
100 Demonic	33	156,662	240.4634	2.54379	68.137

doc#0 slaves.</s><s>Caucasian women are the biggest victims of sex trafficking called White Slavery.</s><s>Are pedophiles human?</s><s>Nc

doc#0 /</s><s>He is not the first to be charged and jailed under human trafficking act.</s><s>That is why he was denied bail.</s><s>You still don

doc#0 ut turn on the communities that welcome them by drugging and trafficking their children?</s><s>Rubbish African unity!</s><s>You can't e

doc#0 using a fictitious child's name in Nigeria all but encourages child trafficking .</s><s>UNICEF's global database of 2021 also revealed that c

doc#0 b sentenced to life imprisonment.</s><s>If u must do human trafficking traffic ur own kids.</s><s>Politics / Re: Obama Using Mill

doc#0 n Haiti since the devastating earthquake struck, raising fears of trafficking for adoption abroad, the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) said Fric

doc#0 human traffickers.</s><s>In as much as i don't support human trafficking ,but you really think prostitution can be stopped?</s><s>In Nige

doc#0 :ex with children.</s><s>The pedophiles are running global sex trafficking and this includes women and girls because they are capable of

doc#0 ng momentum and support from home and abroad.</s><s>Sex Trafficking is on the increase in Nigeria:The National Agency for the Prohib

doc#0 :ex with children.</s><s>The pedophiles are running global sex trafficking and this includes women and girls because they are capable of

doc#0 agency would not rest on its oars until the challenges of human trafficking and child abuse were dealt with in the country.</s><s>Crime / R

doc#0 Trafficking In Nigeria by 1nice(m): 3:43pm On Feb 10, 2023 Sex Trafficking is on the increase in Nigeria:The National Agency for the Prohib

doc#0 slaves.</s><s>Caucasian women are the biggest victims of sex trafficking called White Slavery.</s><s>Are pedophiles human?</s><s>Nc

doc#0 hard to expose those dirty Nigerian politicians involve in human trafficking .</s><s>Say No To Corrupt Nigerian Politicians Behaviour.</s><

doc#0 /</s><s>There is no centralisation and this is contributing to child trafficking in the country."</s><s>Ibrahim Oredola, tech expert and founde

doc#0 view of Oloture Oloture is a movie that revolves around human trafficking , adventurous quest, intrigues, murder, struggle for survival and

Figure 2. Concordance view of 'trafficking'.

Prostitution/commodification of sex

Commodification is a major construct revealed in the corpus. Commodification takes its root in commodity – a useful or valuable material which is used for economic purposes. The construction of human trafficking as commodification of sex has to do with trafficking humans for sexual gratification for those who pay for the services rendered. Some keywords in Table 1 which magnify and implicate this construction as prostitution or commodification of sex are traffick, prostitution, sodomy, ashawo, brothel, re-enslavement, deviant, debauchery, Libyan, and Italian. The keywords which serve as pointers in this regard and their meanings are as revealed here. Ashawo (or *asewo*) is a Nigerian word that means prostitute, hore, or slut. Debauchery is an excessive indulgence in sex and other vices. Sodomy relates to anal sex, while brothel is a locale where prostitutes carry out their services. Libya, as identified in extant studies, is a major route or distribution space through which traffick victims are led to a destination. Some of the samples from the posts on the virtual community are apt.

1. *Nigerian politicians and their agents are using Japa Trend (Japa Syndrome) as a means to traffick Nigerians abroad to European countries for Ashawo (Prostitution), force labour and other illegal activities like human organs harvesting and for occultic ritual.*
2. *Oga, those lawmakers are the worst set of people in this country.....if you still believe prostitution can be banned in Nigeria then i don't need to argue with you.*

3. *Human trafficking in Nigeria particularly Imo state is too alarming and shocking and the rate brothels are increasing everyday is alarming: . . . if you can just come into Imo state and search all the brothels and red spots there you might find her. . . according to reports most prostitutes in imo state are persons that were kidnapped from other states in Nigeria and brought into Imo state to do force prostitution (sex slave trafficking).*
4. *Human trafficking in Nigeria is getting too much, this evil human trafficking syndicate can kidnapped a girl in Lagos and sell her as prostitutes to brothel owner in Kaduna state or any other states in Nigeria or even traffick her abroad.*

Samples 1 and 2 commence with the use of collectivisation and association to nominalise the political class as major culprits in trafficking. While Sample 1 uses ‘Nigerian politicians’, Sample 2 uses ‘those lawmakers’ to implicate Nigerian politicians as a group of people who are active agents behind the human traffick business in Nigeria. The phrases collectivise the responsibility to the politicians without indicating the number of those involved. The possessivisation in ‘their agents’ (Sample 1) to assign agent ownership to Nigerian politicians depicts a coordination which involves a syndicate. The incrimination of Nigerian politicians, suggesting that they are beneficiaries of the recent Japa syndrome in Nigeria assigns victim roles to a collectivised group of people, Nigerians. Japa syndrome – a term used previously among Nigerians to connote illegal migration – is now used to imply legal and illegal migration to saner climes. Japa involves all forms of relocation from Nigeria which has been associated with an economically stifling space, to greener pasture. The text underscores the fact that Nigerians have fallen victim to trafficking occasioned by their (inordinate) zest to embrace *Japa* as a solution to their discomfort in Nigeria. The portrayed location of greener pasture is Europe – nominated as the epicentre of illegal migration and prostitution. Further intext reading implicates Italy, as confirmed in extant studies, as the main European destination for human trafficking and prostitution, while Libya is consistently identified as the passage. The writer implicates Nigerian politicians and their agents as accomplices who benefit from the economic woes of the downtrodden to lure them into prostitution as a way of life, reaping them of their dignity in order to gift them a trifling sum for survival. Allegations have emerged on corrupt practices in Nigeria as a part of the reasons for economic imbalances in the country. The rendition that now allocates the role of a beneficiary to the political class seems to portray their intention abinitio as deliberately pauperising Nigerians to their personal advantage. This view then heightens and associates political office holders with abuse of power or office. This is related to Van Dijk’s (1997) argument on manipulation which does not only involve power, but abuse of power, that is domination.

In Sample 2, the nominalisation of the politicians in ‘those lawmakers’ is followed by descriptivisation which specifies and identifies a negative identity with the politicians. The negative identity ‘worst set of people’ depicts the perception and tagging of members of the political class by the populace. The subsequent conditional clausal configuration ‘if you. . .’ underscores the writer’s belief and the representation of Nigerian political figures as beneficiaries of prostitution who take advantage of their victims to

satisfy their concupiscence desire, sexual gratification, and economy. The rendition portrays a hopeless situation since those at the helm of affairs – political gladiators – are seen as beneficiaries. The situation then presents a hopeless and helpless situation to legislate against the illicit behaviour since they benefit from it. The labelling of Nigerian politicians as sexual predators and supplanters calls the political class to question. Similarly, Sample 3 hinges on the construct of human trafficking for prostitution. The sample nominalises and identifies ‘Human trafficking in Nigeria’ and subsequently aggregates the recurrence of Imo State as a destination, using the quantificational value ‘too alarming’ to express detest in the recurrence. The sample implies that one of the 36 states in Nigeria, Imo State, is a major or one of the destinations of human trafficking with an emphasis on prostitution in Nigeria. The text is a case of a missing girl, who obviously was kidnapped or abducted, suggestively, beyond her wish. The text also collectivises and assigns the role of prostitution destination to the territorial locations that are named ‘brothels’ and ‘red spots’. The nomination and incrimination of Imo State as a major human trafficking destination by the writer is a warning to co-online participants to be wary of the capabilities and activities which are carried out in the space. It also identifies the state as a destination where security agencies must make their first port of call when in search of missing persons. However, the construction in Sample 4 further suggests that Imo State cannot be said to be the only destination of prostitution in Nigeria. It decentralises the location, using Kaduna as another sample to claim that it is a chain business which involves different syndicates that are spread all over the country. Sample 4 premodifies the human trafficking syndicate with ‘this evil’, thus assigning them an unfriendly negative tag. Kidnapping fellow human beings or luring and enslaving them as prostitutes, especially for the economic benefit of the kidnapers and traffickers, therefore, represents the traffickers as economic usurpers, exploiters, criminals, dehumanisers, and fraudsters who take advantage of the cluelessness, powerlessness or financial condition of their victims to dehumanise them. Victims are therefore represented as sexually enslaved, by their predators. However, in cases where they are full-blown prostitutes who earn a living from the business, they are also represented as financial beneficiaries. Human trafficking itself is associated with illegality, fraud, and crime.

Abuse and recruitment of underage for labour and sexual satisfaction

Another recurrent construction in the data is the abuse of children and young ones for labour and sexual satisfaction. Abuse – violent and cruel treatment of a person or an animal – is the kind of dastard, inhuman, inhumane, violent, and cruel behaviour that victims of trafficking are subjected to. According to UNSECO, a child is a human being below the age of 18 years. In addition, going by the general dictionary meaning that deemphasises age, if a child is defined as an immature person or a young human being who is not in the age of puberty or the legal age of majority, and graduating into puberty is only a sign that a child has been freshly welcomed into puberty, treating a child as an adult is, therefore, an illegality. An extant non-linguistic study on child trafficking (Tade and Aderinto, 2011) has identified that children in Nigeria are mainly subjected to internal and external labour, where they are endangered by activities that are beyond their

physical strength. However, the corpus of the current study discovers that children, especially the girl-child, are also captured for prostitution, usually against their wishes. Some keywords, displayed in Table 1, which lexically point to this construction as abuse of children for labour and sexual satisfaction of others are child, children, traffick, traitor, paedophile, underage, enslavement, iniquity, almajiri. Child/children is as explained earlier, while a paedophile is a child predator. A traitor is a betrayer, while an underage is a child. Almajiri is a term which originally derives from Almajiranci – a system of Islamic education which is practised in the northern part of Nigeria among Hausa. While Almajiri refers to the male gender, Almajira refers to the female gender. A child usually begins this schooling system between the ages of 3 and 12. However, colloquially, the term Almajiri has been accorded semantic extension today. It is now used to refer to children or young persons or young beggars who roam the street in Northern Nigeria, or young Hausa children who roam the street in any location in Nigeria out of necessity to eat. Such children beg for alms as a result of poverty or lack of access to daily food supply. Meanwhile, the practice of alms begging is widely denounced as child abuse in Nigeria (Nigerian Mothers, 2020).

Sample 5 commences by authenticating a claim, referencing with the use of functionalisation via the mention of 'The International Labour Organisation'. The mention is accompanied by the use of aggregation, statistically presenting the ILO record of the number of children who fall victim to trafficking every year to be an alarming 1.2 million. The sample labels Nigeria as a major donor destination. The sample also incriminates Europe as the receiver of the dastard and inhuman exploitation. The use of the classification identification 'girl' in Sample 4 references and features the girl-child as a victim of the activities of traffickers, thus assigning pity to the group. *Besides the descriptions around the examples in the first construction, Sample 6 labels northerners as paedophiles. The occurrence of paedophiles in the corpus with a score of 342.522, associates old men with taking advantage of underage girls for sexual gratification. The writer attacks the northern culture that permits and allows marriage between a man and an underage girl or a minor as an accomplice in illegality or renamed trafficking. The opinion, thus, is an appeal to humanity, an appeal to sentimentalities and an appeal to the Nigerian State that the negative comparison of the normalised culture in northern Nigeria is an anomaly that must be abrogated. Sample 7 also identifies almajiris as victims of child trafficking and or labour. The sample identifies and nominates insurgents as beneficiaries of child trafficking. Insurgents use the almajiri (children) to prosecute their illegal terror escapades.*

5. *The International Labour Organisation estimates that 1.2 million children are trafficked each year. Nigeria was listed as one of the countries with the largest number of trafficking victims overseas, particularly in Europe.*
6. *What is the difference between small proportion of human trafficking which is done in hiding to the paedophile lifestyle of Northerners done in the open, is illegal trafficking of kids and sexual harassment disguised as marriage not your culture?*
7. *Insurgencies have happened more than once in Borno which has received the largest number of almajiris in northern Nigeria's history.*

Maltreatment of others for huge labour

Abuse and maltreatment of others for huge labour is another construction in the corpus. Maltreatment, which also has to do with abuse or treatment of humans with cruelty or violence, is what (adult) victims of trafficking are subjected to, probably due to their vulnerability. A major keyword, which lexicalises this construction as abuse is (re-)enslavement – making and remaking a slave of a human being.

8. Nigerians are trafficked to Europe for force labour and other illegal activities.

Sample 8 collectivises the group of people known as Nigerians as victims of human trafficking. It condemns the trafficking of humans to Europe for the purposes of forced labour and other illegal activities. Apparently, females are subjected to labour in sexual form. Nonetheless, some men are also subjected to such sex-induced labour, especially in baby factories. Yet, most men are subjected more to physical labour where they dissipate their physical energy to achieve duties which should have been easier with mechanisation. The use of men for such activities due to their vulnerability hypes the attraction of more men for the purposes of trafficking within and outside the country. Such individuals are used to prosecute tasks, physically dissipating energy but earn peanuts as financial rewards. Such rewards are not commensurate with the energy dispelled. This is the re-invention of slavery. The situation aligns with what happened during the era of the slave trade. It remains an appalling attack and a dehumanisation of human dignity. Although Sample 8 uses suppression and backgrounding to implicitly delete or withhold the identification of the personalities who traffick Nigerians to the destination, the construction negatively portrays the social actors involved in the activity. Thus, they are represented as usurpers who use others for illegal activities, while the victims are represented as brainwashed, defenceless, and helpless recipients of the illegal activity, which some see as the only opportunity for survival.

Enforcement and dismembering of humans for occultism and self-health-assurance

Enforcement and dismembering of humans for occultism and self-health-assurance is a dual construction. The first is the use of force to dismember the body of others for ritual purposes, while the other is the use of force, deceit, or financial strength to overpower or convince an economically disadvantaged victim into organ harvest. Dismembering – the cutting of a part of an individual's body – is an action that is often meted out to human-trafficked victims for one of two similar purposes. The one is for the beneficiary to use the body part or whole-body part for occultic purposes in order to acquire more spiritual powers through a fetish means, and the other is to use the body part to the health advantage of the beneficiary, for example, a kidney transplant. Some keywords and phrases, which lexically point to this construction are occultist, organ harvest, satanism, ritual, and demonic. All the words seem familiar. Occultism, as used here, is the belief in the action or influence of supernatural powers.

9. *Prostitutes are killed everyday in Nigeria by human traffickers, ritualists, human organs harvesters, and by different criminal groups: Prostitutes are human beings and are not supposed to be killed like fowl.*

The writer in Sample 9 deploys collectivisation, nomination, categorisation to describe a group of people – prostitutes – as regular victims of some atrocious activities. The beneficialised individuals of the dastard acts meted out to the prostitutes are ritualists and organ harvesters. The writer views that though prostitutes are associated with a negative construct, the individuals assigned to the category are humans who should be accorded human benefits rather than being relegated and equated with fowls. Drawing a negative comparison between humans and fowls, Sample 9 compares the inhumane treatment of individuals used for prostitution with that of a fowl, suggesting that they are killed with reckless abandon. The text assigns the victim role to prostitutes while the beneficialised are the human traffickers and their agents who terminate their lives for the purposes of rituals and dismembering their bodies for rituals. No doubt, prostitution is legalised in some societies and the sex workers in such environs pay taxes to the government. Most European countries and other countries like the USA and China have a specific prostitution tax or impose taxes on prostitution via income tax (Sahin Yesilyurt, 2022). Sex workers in such communities and red spots, commodify their bodies willingly to earn a living.

The writer seems to write from the standpoint of a tacit contractual agreement between the giver and the receiver or the buyer and the seller. If the prostitute is the seller, and the customer comes for patronage, the relationship should be sustained rather than the buyer taking advantage of the vulnerability of the seller, and unleashing dehumanising actions against them. However, the sample here informs prostitutes to be wary of human traffickers who pretend to be interested in their commodity but end up killing them for rituals or harvesting a part of their body for their comfort. The attack on the political class here seems connected with the popularised attempt by a Nigerian politician to engage in a kidney transplant for her daughter in the United Kingdom in 2022. The matter, which became a legal issue was charged to a UK court, while the ranking Nigerian politician was sentenced to about 10 years imprisonment. Sample 1 also implicates Nigerian politicians, their agents, their employers, their distant and veiled kingpins, and others as accomplices who benefit from the financial afflictions of the oppressed and subjugated Nigerians. It particularly assigns the role of human traffickers, especially organ harvesters, ritualists, and occultists in some other cases, to Nigerian politicians. It described them as opportunists who benefit from the woes of the have-nots. Rituals and occultism are meant to appease the gods to pave the way for an individual to achieve a desire. The appeasement of gods explains why the use of satanism and iniquity is flagged in the keywords of our corpus. There have been allegations and counter-allegations against the political class for engaging in this, especially during the election period in order to occupy specific positions. This is connected to the financial and power benefits that are attached to an average political seat in Nigeria. The construction, thus, represents traffick-victims as naïve; they are oblivious to the intent of their suitors. They are also represented as armless, defenceless, and non-violent. The representation thus sensitises, appeals to sentiments and expresses detest about the activities of human traffickers and

their backgrounded and veiled supporters. The traffickers, including political figures involved in the dastard act, are negatively represented as exploiters, criminals, and fraudsters who defraud innocent Nigerians of their God-given possessions for their personal comfort, economic empowerment, spiritual fortification, and health assurance.

Discussion and conclusion

The discourse examination of human trafficking in Nigeria in the conversations in the online space – Nairaland virtual community – has revealed four main constructions orienting to negativity on human trafficking in Nigeria: commodification of sex/prostitution; abuse of underage for labour and sexual satisfaction; abuse of others' huge labour; and enforcement and dismembering of humans for occultism and self-health-assurance. The constructions, thus, negatively portray the trafficking, condemning it as a form of illegality. The constructions were deployed by online participants in the representation of human trafficking, human traffickers, and victims of trafficking. Implicitly and explicitly, the constructs of human traffickers manifested through tagging, negative comparison, appeal to sentimentalities, and expression of detest, while the positive constructs of victims manifested through pity and appeal to humanity. Some of the findings agree with extant studies like Olley et al. (2023). The similarity confirms a synergy between what is obtained in traditional and social media.

Despite the perceived correlation between traditional and social media in the representation of human trafficking in Nigeria, social media participants seem to have more boldness to touch on and identify other hidden identities. Unlike traditional media reports, social media participants often express voices and opinions which may have been suppressed or backgrounded. Thus, online participants do not only project and spread their ideological stances on human traffickers in Nigeria; they also make efforts to suppress opposing stances. This particular finding has not been sufficiently projected in the traditional media. In addition, the state is attacked and tagged as aiding and abetting the criminal activity. This calls the political class to question, invites the state to answer, and exposes anomalies for Nigerians to reject.

Online participants deployed discourse tools like role allocation, nominalisation, description, identification, aggregation, and others to negatively represent human traffickers, which this paper identified to include politicians and their agents, the state and their accomplices as economic usurpers, exploiters, criminals, and fraudsters. Meanwhile, the traffick-victims were represented as downtrodden, economically vulnerable, naïve, non-violent, armless, defenceless, and inactive recipients of the activities of the human traffickers. This aligns with extant studies like Koo (2014) which submits that human trafficking victims are represented in newspapers as helpless and vulnerable, while traffickers or offenders are portrayed as powerful and dangerous. Similarly, Sanford et al. (2016) aver that the media often framed human trafficking as a problem that primarily affects women and children (Sanford et al., 2016). However, the current study argues that men are not entirely absolved as victims of human trafficking, but there is a limitation on the involvement of men depending on the purpose of the trafficking. In addition, rather than the generalisation to all children, the current study through the keyword analysis observes some degree of prominence for the word 'girl' to show that the girl-child is more targeted than the other gender.

The indicators in the sample identify and flag human trafficking perpetrators to include the state, politicians, the well-to-do, kidnappers, ritualists, and occultists. The mention of the state, that is the Federal Government of Nigeria and other political figures is connected with the formation of the Nigerian society that has established a wide gap between the haves and the have-nots. The formation has, thus, incapacitated many Nigerians such that they are at the mercy of others. The involvement of the state and the political class can be categorised as direct and indirect. Whereas direct involvement could be limited, indirect involvement is more popular, despite its veil. The direct involvement of the political class is associated with cases where a few politicians, non-politicians, and their agents, as revealed in the corpus deliberately take advantage of the vulnerability of Nigerians to use them for their satisfaction, coordinate their departure from Nigeria and get them sold into modern slavery – prostituting in Libya, Italy and other countries for peanuts for the workers and more money for the suppliers; fly them abroad for organ harvest to stabilise their health status and those of their family members; and kidnap them for occultic purposes – to renew or earn spiritual powers for the journey ahead. Most humans have been trafficked to Italy, Belgium, Holland, and France (Olukoshi, 2001).

The indirect involvement is a function of the state that has made survival for an average Nigerian difficult even in their country. It is estimated that an average Nigerian feeds with less than a dollar. This challenging economic reality has made it difficult for most Nigerians to fend for themselves. While many have had to resort to begging for alms, others embrace whatever is dangled at them. This aligns with previous studies (Adeyeye and Egbulefu, 2022; Olley et al., 2023) which enumerate poverty, lack of education, unemployment, political instability, armed conflict, and weak law enforcement as factors that exacerbate human trafficking in Nigeria. Today, some ladies have resorted to exchanging their dignity for survival – they satisfy men in bed, not out of wish but to ensure they feed to live. On the other hand, men, including graduates, also embrace very demeaning energy-sapping and life-threatening labour just to fend for themselves and their families.

Unfortunately, what is more appalling about the economic reality in Nigeria is that Nigerian politicians and lawmakers are about the highest paid in the world, whereas Nigerians are one of the least paid in the world. This means the concentration of wealth in the hands of the minority and the concentration of poverty in the hands of the majority. Members of the political class have consistently denied this, and are often very fast to declare their basic salary. However, they usually veil the disclosure of their allowances. In addition, the 1999 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria which has been a major tool in the imbalances between the leaders and the led empowers members of the political class to directly receive constituency allowances, thus individualising what is executed with the allowances. This is where many politicians further defraud Nigerians and pauperise the masses. Many of them receive very humongous amounts of money which only end up in their personal treasury. Since 1999 when Nigeria fully returned to democracy, more politicians have emerged, cutting a slice or more slices from the supposed commonwealth of the nation. This has promoted and encouraged the concentration of wealth in the hands of the political class and the pauperisation of the masses. Thus, Nigeria has recently become a stifling space where survival is challenging. This has led to insecurity of lives and property, such that some begin to steal, kidnap for ransom, and kill others to survive, thereby exacerbating the spate of insecurity. The spate of

economic frustration and security challenges experienced in Nigeria has no doubt promoted the recent surge in the *Japa* syndrome. Nigerians scamper for survival out of their fatherland. Many resort to desperation to leave the country at all costs and as a result fall victim to human trafficking.

The implications of the discourse patterns for intervention strategies, policymaking, and awareness campaigns are rife. The Nigerian State, NAP TIP and Nigerians have individual and collective roles to play. The State needs to ensure the eradication of challenges like bad leadership, corruption, and insecurity, which have increased the rate of unemployment in Nigeria. This, in agreement with extant studies (Ibrahim and Omoregbe, 2020), is a major reason Nigerians embrace migrating for labour or sex work in other European and Western nations which have better economic value. There is a need for stricter penalties which compel the political class and others to flee direct or indirect involvement in any appearance of trafficking. NAP TP, in collaboration with the State and other foreign agencies, has a role to play in the form of an awareness campaign by orientating and reorientating the Nigerian citizenry on human dignity and other social values.

This study posits that human trafficking in Nigeria is exacerbated by the activities and actions of the political class, network operations and syndicates, insecurity of lives and property, kidnapping, coercion, lack of state protection, persistent unemployment, increasing economic hardship, poverty, ignorance, conflict, vulnerability, deteriorating living conditions, human deprivation, hopelessness among others. Who has the power to change the story of Nigerians? Sure, it is the state. Who are those that make up the voices of the state? Sure, it is the political class. What is forcing more Nigerians to fall victim to human trafficking? Apparently, it is the challenges faced within the Nigerian geographical space. The delay in solving this awful challenge further portrays the Nigerian State and the political class in black as a major perpetrator of human trafficking. The earlier the state and the political class rise to address this distressing situation, the better.

In conclusion, participants' constructions, and representations in the Nairaland virtual community project and spread ideological stances on human trafficking in Nigeria, making efforts to project opposing and suppressed stances.

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ORCID iD

Ayo Osisanwo  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5365-0926>

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Author biography

Ayo Osisanwo, PhD, is a Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. His articles have appeared in international journals, including *Critical Discourse Studies*, *Language Matters*, *Discourse and Society*, *Discourse and Communication*, *African Identity*, *Journal of Forensic Psychology Research and Practice*, *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, *Corpus-Based Studies Across Humanities*, *Language and Semiotic Studies*, *Comedy Studies*, *Howard Journal of Communications*, *Mediální Studia*, *Athens Journal of Mass Media and Communication*, *Research in English and Applied Linguistics*, *World Journal of English Language*, *Journal of Linguistic Association of Nigeria*, *Ibadan Journal of Humanistic/English Studies*, among others. He has also authored, contributed to and co-edited some books. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow of the African Humanities Programme (AHP) of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), New York, USA. He is a 2020 Grantee, Remote-mentorship, African Humanities Programme (AHP) of the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), Department of Linguistics, University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania; and a Fellow of the Georg Forster Fellowship for Experienced Researchers, Alexander von Humboldt Foundation Germany. Currently, he is a Senior Researcher at the Institute of English Studies, Leuphana Universität, Lüneburg, Germany.