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# Social Media and Women's Culture of Silence on Sexual Violence: Perception of Babcock University's Female Undergraduates

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## Abstract

The study examines the perception of female undergraduates' about the role of social media in breaking women's culture of silence on sexual violence. Violence against women is a subject of concern due to its prevalence and the culture of silence associated with it. Involvement of social media groups appears to be changing this trend as women are supported to speak out. The study examines some social media platforms involved in this campaign, how they contribute to knowledge of females and shape their attitude to information on sexual violence on social media as well as their perception of the effectiveness of the social media in the campaign against sexual violence among women. Anchored on two theories - agenda setting and the spiral of silence, the study through a descriptive survey, sampled the perception of 370 female undergraduates of Babcock University. Responses derived from a questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Students were moderately exposed to campaigns on sexual violence (Mean= 3.32, SD=1.49), just as majority have a positive perception of the social media's role in breaking the culture of silence on sexual violence ( $\bar{x}$ = 5.00, SD=0.00). The need to intensify efforts in reaching more females especially those who still have limited knowledge and tend to be silent was underscored.

**Key Words:** Campaigns, Culture of Silence, Social Media Involvement, Sexual Violence.

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## Introduction

Sexual violence is a global menace affecting females regardless of their age, social status, religion, education or race. Yet globally, females constitute about half of the world's total population (<https://countrymeters.info/en/World>, 2020). The pattern is not different in Nigeria where the female population stands at 49.34 as at 2018 (World Bank, 2020). While there are many reasons why females may fall victim, one popular reason is the growing culture of silence. Perpetrators often exploit this and offending continues as they escape punishment. A lot of females who were violated when they were younger hardly disclosed their ordeal so their parents remained ignorant of the issue often till the victims are older. The victims suffer in silence for fear of condemnation and threat to life. They experience behavioral and psychological problems, self-hate, depression, low self-esteem, suicidal thoughts not excluding alcohol use and drug abuse (Saunders & Kindy, 1993). There is evidence in the press and wider literature that the problem persists.

The *Punch Newspaper* (September 22, 2017) revealed a disturbing circle of family based violence including 564 cases of domestic violence, 60 cases of defilement, 11 incidents of attempted rape, 123 child neglects/abuse incidents and 84 miscellaneous cases. Before the year 2017, *The Vanguard Newspaper* (January 17, 2014) reported in an editorial that between March 2012 and March 2013, the Lagos State Police reported 678 cases of rape. Many more go undetected because of under reporting by the victims or the family members.

Black, Basile, Breiding, et. al (2011) estimated that 32.3 per cent of multiracial women, 27.5 per cent of American Indian/Alaska Native women, 21.2 per cent of non-Hispanic black women, 20.5 per cent of non-Hispanic white women, and 13.6 per cent of Hispanic women were raped during their lifetimes. It was also found that about three out of four adolescents (74 per cent ) who had been sexually assaulted were victimized by someone they knew well; one-fifth (21.1 per cent ) of offences were committed by a family member (Kilpatrick, Saunders, & Smith, 2003).

Sexual violence is not only common in the family circle; even in institutions of learning, the rate of occurrence is alarming. It is estimated in reports from a US based resource center that at least one in five women (as against one in sixteen men) are sexually violated while in college (National Sexual Violence Resource Center, 2018). Another survey conducted by the Human Rights Commission cited on ABC News (2017) showed that more than half of all university students in America sampled across 39 universities were sexually harassed on at least one occasion. Mazer and Percival (1989:1), stated that "eighty-nine percent of women reported at least one incident of harassment, with most incidents occurring in class or with other students".

Similarly, studies conducted in Nigeria's institutions of higher learning show a high rate of sexual violence occurrence among female students, with many unreported. Over the years, no significant difference has been noted in terms of reduction in the trend of occurrence. In a 2010 study, Ogunbodede, Bello and Ogunbodede (2014) reported that out of 388 female undergraduates in Ibadan, 262 had experienced at least one form of sexual abuse with unwanted touching being the commonest. The study revealed that the respondents had good knowledge but poor attitude to sexual abuse with many cases left unreported. In a similar study, Mezie-Okoye and Alamina (2014), found a high rate of sexual violence among students of the University of Port Harcourt. Out of the 413 female students who participated in the study, 193 had suffered one form of sexual violence or the other with fondling/grabbing of sensitive body parts being the commonest.

Some institutions in Nigeria came into spotlight when BBC News Africa released a documentary tagged *Sex for Grades* which highlighted the prevalence of sexual molestation of female undergraduates. In *The Punch* editorial of October 11, 2019 on the subject, it was revealed that females who experience sexual harassments on campus will experience shame, loss of self-esteem, unwanted pregnancies, poor academic performance and in extreme cases, may commit suicide. Citing a UNESCO report, the editorial emphasized that among students who had experienced sexual violence, 27 per cent contemplated suicide or self-harm, 15 per cent developed eating disorders, 15 per cent abused alcohol or drugs, 50 per cent had their academic performance negatively impacted, 11 per cent experienced delayed academic progress (*The Punch*, 2019). From the reactions that followed on social media and other news platforms, this is a common problem that had plagued educational institutions for many years, yet it did not abate for several reasons. One of these is the fact that female students who had been violated are often likely to be silent as a result of the shock experienced, and in most cases because the inflictor of violence (usually a lecturer) had threatened to deal with them if they dared to speak up.

Evidently, one point which the inflictor of violence tends to exploit is the silence of the victim. In most cases, women are the most vulnerable not just due to their fragile nature, but because of some cultural beliefs and lack of awareness of where they can get help. The relegation of women as 'second class citizens' with little or nothing to contribute to the society persists in many cultural contexts. Thapa (1996:1-3) in a study found "high reproductive morbidity in many developing countries with women opting to neither discuss their problems nor seek medical care. They suffer [from] their affliction [living] in fear of being ostracized". This has led to a culture of silence provoked by fear of being ridiculed. As Renzetti rightly observed,

"speaking up is a beginning process which can last years also because the women are afraid of not being believed, fear of being hounded, worrying about what their family members will think, worry about 'ruining' the life of the perpetrator and they are afraid of entering the tunnel of justice system with no promise [of] justice at the end". (2014:3-5)

Often times, victims find it difficult to live with the fact that they were violated and so, they tend to hold it in and no one can tell what they are thinking. Although punishable under law, sexual violence is often motivated by a thrill of power and domination over the victim as well as the excitement that the victim is helpless with no power to do anything about it. Sexual violence includes sexual exploitation and sexual abuse and it mostly occurs as rape where the perpetrator gets his way most times if he could overpower his victims. Although the crime of sexual violence happens to both male and female gender, females are more subjected to abuse. Research has shown that in Nigeria, rape is one of the most common forms of assault and violence reported among women.

Studies have shown that the more women are aware of this problem, the better they are able to avoid becoming victims. In fulfilling its normative roles, the media, particularly the traditional media, have been at the forefront of the fight against sexual crimes against women with little success as the rate of occurrence increases regularly mostly because victims do not speak up mostly due to negative social attitudes. The media shares in this blame; a study conducted in Britain showed that out of a sample of 1600 women, 70 per cent feel the media is unsympathetic to women who report rape, while more than half say the same is true of the legal system and society in general (Lakhani, 2012).

The findings were the result of a study initiated by Mumsnet, a UK based social network for parents in preparation for the launch of its campaign to dispel myths surrounding sexual violence. The week-long "We Believe You" campaign, supported by other charities Rape Crisis, Barnardo's and the End Violence Against Women coalition, was to encourage victims to speak up and access support and justice. The #justsaysorry campaign launched by two university students in the UK further affirm the existence of this problem.

A variety of interested parties have worked through both traditional and social media to address this problem. It appears that traditional media are increasingly being preferred for the usually sensitive task. Since the social media became widely available, different advocacy groups including individuals, government, NGOs and

other well-meaning organizations which stand against diverse inhuman offences, have adopted them in their campaigns to support victims and get social justice.

The foregoing shows that social media can contribute to changes in observed cultures of silence as more and more women are gaining the boldness to speak up. These are dividends of various associations standing against sexual violence. Many groups have been created on different social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, where victims can share their experiences and remain anonymous at the same time. Such groups connect people with similar experiences, engaging them in discussions on what happened to them – victims are thus encouraged. From these fora, ideas on prevention strategies and what to do if it happens are shared. The National Sexual Violence Resource Center (NSVRC) is a Twitter platform that has sponsored different campaigns concerning issues of sexual violence. There is also the Post and Trauma platform, #MeToo Campaign and the Survivor Alliance Blog which is a blog for allies and survivors of sexual assault.

The release of the BBC News Africa's documentary by a female journalist, emboldened many other females, who took to social media to speak of their experiences - some went as far as identifying the lecturers that harassed them by name. These were from Nigeria and Ghana. Since the expose, the identified institutions of learning and others, have been forced to revisit their policies and attitude to sexual harassment. These developments underscore the power of the media to create awareness, provide support and facilitate changing attitudes to sexual harassment. These changes are evident in people other than vulnerable female undergraduates; other members of the society in general are changing too. In this way, social media can be seen as positive change agents.

Meanwhile, some studies in Nigeria have also linked gender-based violence (GBV) to social media acquaintanceships. One of such studies conducted in 2016 by Makinde, Odimegwu, Abdulmalik, Babalola and Fawole (2016) revealed that out of the five cases selected for the study, all the victims had their first encounter with the perpetrators on *Facebook*. There is no doubt that while social media have advantages, there are a number of disadvantages but these can be minimized with adequate education. Quebec (nd) noted that:

Media coverage of crimes, including sexual assault, has an impact on the **knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and behaviour** of the public regarding these phenomena. It is a known fact that beliefs and attitudes supportive of sexual assault play a major role in the existence of this phenomenon and society's response to it. For that reason, the media have a part to play in the prevention of sexual assault (L.3-9)

As noted above, media campaigns have been launched in and outside Nigeria to effect required social change. Since many of the popular social media campaigns were launched outside Nigeria, some questions remain. How effective are these campaigns in terms of the level of awareness they generate, the knowledge imparted, even attitudes shaped by exposure to the messages. Indeed it is worth examining how the vulnerable population, exemplified by female undergraduates, see the role of the social media in this cause. It is against this background that the study examines the extent to which the involvement of social media has improved knowledge, attitude and perception of undergraduate females on sexual violence in order to break the culture of silence.

## **Objectives of the study**

The study

1. examined the social media platforms from which female undergraduates were informed of sexual violence
2. investigated the extent to which social media campaigns had contributed to the knowledge of female undergraduates on sexual violence
3. determined the attitude of female undergraduates to information on sexual violence on social media
4. explored the perception of female undergraduates on the effectiveness of social media in breaking the culture of silence

## **Theoretical background**

The study anchors its theoretical justification on two theories – agenda setting and the spiral of silence. The spiral of silence theory underscores the danger associated with the increasing pressure people feel which makes them hide their views or feelings when they think they are in the minority (Kenamer, 1990; Liu and Fahmy, 2011). This may be worsened by the fear of reprisal or vengeance by those who hurt them. The agenda setting theory on the other hand affirms the positive role the media plays in changing public perception and attitude to certain issues when they are projected as important ([Franklin](#), [Hamer](#), [Hanna](#), [Kinsey](#) and [Richardson](#), 2005).

Awosusi and Ogundana (2015) affirm the position of Noelle-Neumann from the result of their study on the wave of sexual violence in Nigeria and under-reporting of sexual crimes, stating that the under-reporting of rape is based on some factors like rape myths, poor response from law enforcement agents and false accusations. People who had experienced this violent act therefore cautioned themselves for fear of

further emotional trauma. Shoemaker, Breen and Stamper (2000) also conducted a study on the fear of social silence to test the fear of isolation assumption in its relativeness to the spiral of silence theory and opinion formation. The researchers found that the fear of isolation comes with social anxiety.

## **Sexual violence**

The World Health Organization (2012:2), defines "sexual violence as any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic, or otherwise directed, against a person's sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home or work." According to the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against women, adopted by the General Assembly (1993), violence against women is defined as the act of gender-based violence which turns into or is likely to cause, physical, sexual, psychological harm or suffering to women including threats and acts such as coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private.

Sexual violence is any forced sexual act carried out on someone without the person's consent. These acts include rape, molestation and such. The perpetration of sexual violence could involve the use of force by the offender, and the unwillingness of the victim. The Survivor Alliance Blog (SAB, 2017) explains that the different forms of sexual assault include rape, sexual harassment, multiple-perpetrator sexual assault and stalking. Rape is described as a type of sexual assault which involves penetration of any hole in the body (vaginal, anal, and oral) without consent. Although, rape is known as an act of physical force but force needs not to have been used for the act to be classified as rape. It could be a violent act in which the survivor struggles for freedom but the perpetrator never gives in to the pleas. As such, it could be violent and non-violent and as discussed above, it feeds on fear and silence.

Sexual Harassment on the other hand is described as the act of unwelcomed physical or verbal behavior of a sexual nature by a person in authority towards a worker, younger person, student etc. According to the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (USEEOC, 2018:1-3), harassment includes unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors. It also manifests in forms of groping, catcalls and such intimidating practices to which victims are subjected. Sexual harassment is not limited solely to learning environments or the workplace; it could occur anywhere - in public or private. Many women have experienced a form of sexual harassment in their lifetime.

Multi-perpetrator sexual assault is the third form of sexual violence identified by SAB (2017). It is described as gang rape and it can take different forms. It can start out as



a normal sexual act between two people but others begin to join in without one partner's consent, it ends up becoming a non-consensual group act which is also a form of rape. It could be a planned act and the act could be carried out with or without drugging the victim. The act could be part of initiation rites into a group.

Stalking is a pattern of repeated harassment - unwanted contact and attention, or other contact that scares the victim or makes them uncomfortable. Contact need not be direct. It could include emails, repeated unwanted calls, messages, receiving of unwanted gifts. It could even include following a person all the time – online or in real life; waiting for the person at certain locations or even threatening loved ones. Stalking is not just a form of sexual violence but a crime and is punishable by law.

### **A growing culture of silence**

The culture of silence is described as the behavior of a group of people that by unuttered agreement do not mention, discuss or acknowledge a particular subject. In this context, it is the act of keeping an unspoken agreement not to speak about what happened to them. Although not all women keep silent but most do because they are sad and uncomfortable about the subject if brought up or discussed around them. There are many rational reasons for silence on the part of the victims. For some, getting raped a second time closes their mind. Some victims do not just feel used, they fear not being believed, they fear retaliation and then, there is the great shame they feel (Contreras, Bott, Guedes and Dartnall 2010). Espey (2009) says this issue remains in the shadow for a combination of socio-cultural, resource and service-related reasons. For instance lack of services and support systems that give survivors the required help may prevent the issues from gaining deserved attention. Similarly some socio-cultural traditions are obstructive too - sometimes knowledge that people may pour scorn on the victims, or that some religious or other perspectives including those which may even imply that women incite such violence obstruct the illumination of the issue. Young women and girls may be afraid that revealing a history of sexual violence will undermine their chances of marriage. Lastly, victims may consider it futile to speak up if the state lacks appropriate judicial systems and measures to punish offenders adequately. According to Fenton, often times, the assaulted victims are mistreated by the mishandling and quick dismissal of rape cases while some shy away from being known as or called 'victims'. Eze (2013), affirms that one way to break the silence and discourage a rise in the incidence, these victims or survivors should be encouraged to participate in available community-based services.

Several meetings and conferences have been held in past years to break the silence and raise awareness concerning issues of sexual violence. In the year 1979, the UN adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against



Women (CEDAW) and in 1994, the UN created the post of a Special rapporteur on Violence against Women. It was not till 2009 that health specialists, researchers and policy makers met in South Africa for the first Sexual Violence Research Initiative Conference to highlight the devastating scale of sexual violence around the world (Espey 2009). Ever since, the issue of silence has been a constant subject of concern - the fact remains that this problem persists. Eze (2013) opines that this problem may be reduced through a concerted effort involving different stakeholders through public enlightenment campaigns and education at schools, social, cultural and religious meetings as well as the media.

Other social scientists have examined the different dimensions of sexual violence against women. Wise (2012), concluded that sexual violence is a prevalent problem not only in the United States but all over the world. She found that rape could occur at the hands of anyone be it stranger or family member and it could be used as a tool of war. Explaining further, Wise asserts that the way rape is viewed in the society has to do with rape myths, victims being blamed and how they are treated which was discovered to be one of the reasons rape is hardly ever reported. She concludes that adopting media literacy will help to create awareness. Valls, Puigvert, Melgar and Garcia-Yeste (2016), exploring the issues of silence in Spanish Universities found that 62 per cent of students know or have experienced sexual assault in the school environment while 13 per cent could identify violent situations. They identified two main problems contributing to this problem as under-reporting of the crimes due to fear, stalking, threats and refusing to acknowledge or identify violent situations. They advocate for universities to take action towards any type of violence against women through bystander intervention and support for victims.

Decker and Sherman (2016), in their study stated that women are mistreated and abused by people in power. It is so common for women to stay quiet about assault cases and there is an assumption perpetrators have about the women not being given chances to talk which also strengthens their silence. They stated that understanding and giving justice can be used to achieve the goals of breaking the silence. In their study, Phasha and Magogo (2012), suggest that sex education is needed for the students in rural schools to prevent rape, HIV/AIDS and sex related problems. They opine that a society where discussions about sexual related matters are discouraged will only encourage ignorance among students are ignorant.

## **The role of the media in breaking the culture of silence**

One of the factors responsible for the practice of sexual violence and the growing culture of silence among women are the negative **social norms** which the media can play an active role in shaping. Social norms supportive of sexual assault and gender

inequality can be discouraged by the media in order to prevent the occurrence of sexual violence. Furthermore, while exploring the prevention of sexual assault in Nigeria, Eze (2013) puts the media at the forefront as champions of this cause. This is alongside public enlightenment campaigns by civil society groups who are advocating for a change in attitude – to demystify myths about sexual assault, stop the blaming of victims rather than the violence inflictor for the acts.

Apart from providing education, the media perform surveillance roles which entail acting as modern day sentinels and lookouts by calling the attention of the members of the society to certain information that are important for them to make quality decisions and achieve quality life (Dominick, 2011). The media play this role by creating awareness, improving knowledge and changing attitude of citizens sometimes to discourage various anti-social behaviors such as sexual violence. One of the ways in which the media can do this is to create awareness and empower women in order to bridge knowledge gaps on sexual violence. Before the advent of social media, the traditional media had been at the forefront of this task, however, not much success has been made as most affected women hardly want to be seen or heard. Quebec (n.d.) noted that with the advent of social media, anyone who is called on to speak out about sexual assault can contribute to society's understanding of the phenomenon.

The anonymous status which a social media user may adopt however seems to be helping more women come out of their shell to speak about this social menace on different social media platforms including Instagram, Twitter, WhatsApp and Facebook. Through social media, several victims including prominent individuals have made a call on others to lend a voice to their plea. One of such calls was made by Alyssa Milano, a Hollywood actress who was sexually assaulted by Harvey Weinstein, another celebrity in the industry. Alyssa launched the #metoo campaign and "by around 4 a.m. that day, there were about 200,000 #metoo tweets published by Twitters account and the stories poured forth from Facebook also with nearly 80,000 people talking about the issue" (*The Washington Post*, 2017). It became the top trend on Twitter nationwide and became a rallying cry for those who had experienced any form of assault, from teen years abuse, bad memories of abuse in the workplaces that were never revealed, troubles they encountered and even verbal abuse, humiliation from their family members due to their silence. It wasn't just typing hashtag but individuals began to really open up about their experiences in the hands of abusers and they were expressive about it. One woman tweeted "#MeToo when I was in the military" (*The Washington Post*, 2017) and she stated that she kept quiet for self- protection more than a few times which means she was abused more than once. Another victim stated, "I have been raped twice in my life, stalked four times

and threatened with my life when I tried to speak out at age 14" (*The Washington Post*, 2017).

Other victims chose to go down memory lane to the year 2005 when a similar incident occurred but with the #NotOkay following a leaked video in which Donald Trump boasted about kissing and groping women (*Washington Post*, 2017). This trend resonates with the fact that so many women have been sexually assaulted and violated but upon hearing so many voices of others who confirm that they have been violated, gain the courage to speak up without fear of reprisal or reproach. Similarly, results of a study conducted by Mass, McCauley, Bonomi and Leija (2018) revealed that while political leaders symbols can be salient icons of the rape culture, Twitter can be used as a public platform to challenge the problematic social discourses and that they circulate. It can also be used to organize and call for action/change.

Akinbobola (2019) noted that social media effectively brought to the open the issue of sex for grades which generated so many positive and negative reactions following BBC documentary coverage which went viral. While many rape cases remain unresolved, the indicted lecturers in the two universities featured have since been dismissed, an action which many hope will serve as a warning to other lecturers. This again reinforces how social media can be effectively used to stage a front burner agenda. In the same light, Egbegi, Ajah and Chukwuemeka (2019) submitted that investigative journalism can play a crucial role in bringing allegations of sexual assault in the Nigerian university system to light. They observed that investigative journalism is an unrecognized approach to the detection of assault cases.

## **Synopsis of some local and global social media campaigns on sexual violence**

### **#MeToo**

The 'Me Too' movement was founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke an American social activist who decided to use the phrase 'me too' in addressing sexual harassment against women of color. Her aim was to empower women through empathy, demonstrating to the world just how common sexual assault is. Although she started the campaign on Myspace social network, it was not till several other women including celebrities like Alyssa Milano connected with the cause in 2017 that the campaign became a global phenomenon. Speaking with regard to their experience in the hands of the popular Hollywood producer – Harvey Weinstein, Alyssa coordinated a movement using Burke's phrase 'me too', to stand in solidarity with these victims of sexual harassment. The campaign has not lost steam, it uses the harsh tag #MeToo on Instagram and Twitter to discourage sexual harassment and sexual assaults.



Source: <https://i-dailymail-co.uk.cdn.ampproject.org/ii/w680/i.dailymail.co.uk/i/pix/.jpg>

## #1in3Africa

This campaign was launched by a prominent Nigerian, and at the time, wife the Ooni of of Ile-Ife, one of most significant traditional rulers in Yorubaland, Olori Wuraola Ogunwusi. Ever since its launch in 2017, the campaign deemed to have originated from the heart of Nigerian sisterhood has gained the support of many high profile Nigerian men and women. These include public figures, celebrities from various walks of life - politics, and the arts. At the core of this campaign lies is its desire to eliminate various forms of violence against women, knowing that these remain the bane of society despite persistent attempts to curb these (hernetwork.co, 2017). At its launch in 2017, a walk to create awareness of the movement was held in Ikoyi a highbrow area of Lagos city. Their mission was summed up in three facts which account for the Twitter hashtag by which the movement is known, #1in3Africa - 1in3women is abused daily, 1in3women could die in the hands of an intimate partner; 1in3women could be your sister, mother, aunt or friend.



Image source: <https://dailytimes.ng/photos-1in3africa-walk-domestic-violence/>

July2, 2017

## #Breakthesilence

The Haven at Wolverhampton in the United Kingdom is a refuge for vulnerable women and children. It is just an example of many charity organisations which has used the hashtag Breakthesilence campaign to reach its clients. There are several initiatives, around the world round, geared towards demystifying the scourge of rape and domestic violence. The common mission is to support women and children who have been experienced domestic abuse including rape. Through Twitter, Instagram and Facebook posts, the organizations circulate unique messages addressing different reasons why women who have been abused should not be quiet. Some messages help the women (regardless of their age) identify abusive acts that they had been unaware of. They also provide platforms where the women connect with each other and share experiences.



Source: <https://www.neighbourly.com/TheHavenWolverhampton>

## #JustSaySorry

Founded by two US based women, Kamilah Willingham and Wagatwe Wanjuki., the #JustSaySorry is a grassroots campaign aimed at empowering survivors of gender-based violence experienced on university campuses just like the founders did. The objective is to make them assertive, to the end that they can demand apologies from the institutions that failed them. Their campaign has been used to highlight the enormity of the responsibility of universities to ensure that they create safe, rape-free environments on their campus. The campaigners used both Twitter and Facebook for their campaign. Although, this campaign was launched in the USA, its impact has been felt much further away in Nigeria. These social media platforms have facilitated global dissemination of the ideas aimed at effecting changes in how higher institutions manage cases of sexual harassments.

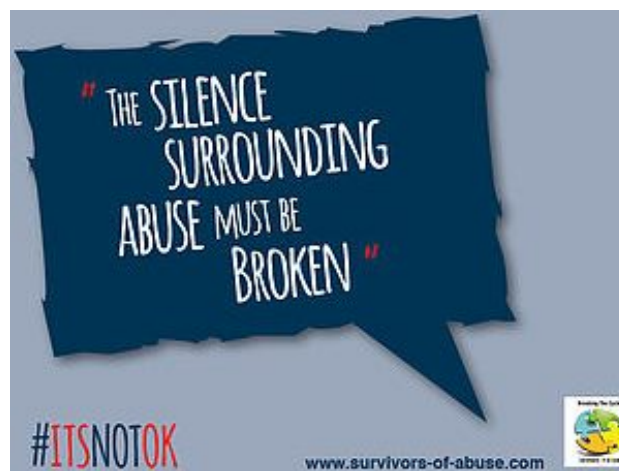




Source: (<http://blackyouthproject.com/justsaysorry-campaign-lights-up-social-media-for-sexual-assault-survivors/>)

### #itsnotok

This is a campaign aimed at raising awareness of child sexual exploitation, helping people recognize the signs, encouraging people to report it and providing support to victims and those most at risk. The campaigners use two major social media platforms – Twitter and Facebook in providing help and linking up with children, young people, parents and relevant professionals. It was launched by Project Phoenix as a collaboration of public and third sector partners throughout Greater Manchester. The campaigners aspire to be national leaders in the approach being taken to protect young people and prosecute offenders.



Source: [www.suvivorsofabuse.com](http://www.suvivorsofabuse.com)

### #ibelievesurvivors

The Centre for Research and Education on Violence against women and children launched the #IBelieveSurvivors and #WeBelieveSurvivors in solidarity with women

who had broken their silence and bravely testified against their violators. Its massive social media campaign was launched in March 2016, in defiance of anticipated injustice in a sexual assault court case where the accused (Jian Ghomesh) was a high profile musician/ radio broadcaster. The campaign thus offered support for diverse people who lived with the experience of sexual violence, encouraging them to shun the fear of being disbelieved. The Canadian based organization encourages individuals to use their social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter) to share their stories and by so doing demonstrate their love and support for survivors of sexual assault.



Source: <https://twitter.com/farrahsafiakhan/status/712640775108952065/photo/1>

#### **#SexualAssault**

The sexual assault hashtag is a popular sign used by anyone who wants to speak on the social media, especially Twitter, about their experience or concerns about sexual violence. The hashtag has been used to initiate conversations on these issues by different individuals, organisations and governments over the years.

## **Methodology**

A questionnaire, divided into six sections, was used to gather primary data regarding the perception of Babcock University's Female Undergraduates of Social Media and Women's Culture of Silence on Sexual Violence based on a sample of campaigns which have been introduced above. These were selected due to their prominence (at the time of the study) in spaces to which the target respondents could reasonably be assumed to have access. The Taro Yamane (1967) sample size determination formula was used to arrive at a sample size of 370 obtained from a total population of 4,937 female undergraduates enrolled in Babcock University for the 2017/2018 academic session. To ensure a close representation, multistage sampling technique was used to select respondents. First, out of the nine female hostels available, three - namely Felicia Adebisi Dada (126), Havillah Gold (132) and Nyberg (112) - were randomly



selected. A quota proportional to their population was then assigned. The final respondents for the study were purposively determined as only those who were willing participated due to the sensitive nature of the study. The study was validated using the content and construct validity tests to ensure that the questionnaire items were appropriate and relevant to the objectives of the study. A pilot study was also conducted to pre-test the instrument which allowed the researchers to study and restructure some of the items that appeared confusing or which respondents avoided. Data was analyzed and presented using frequency distribution tables, charts and average weighted mean (AWM) scores from a five-point Likert scale.

## Findings

Out of the 370 copies of the instrument administered, 368 copies were retrieved and validated for the study, giving a 99.5 percent return rate. The data analysis was therefore based on 368 which accounts for the summaries reported below.

Research Question 1: Through what social media platforms are female undergraduates informed of sexual violence?

Table 1: Mean response on media on which female undergraduates have come across information on sexual violence

| Exposure of female undergrads to social media information on sexual violence     | SA<br>(5)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | A<br>(4)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | D<br>(3)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | SD<br>(2)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | U<br>(1)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | Mean<br>( $\bar{x}$ ) | SD   |
|--|---------------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| I have come across WhatsApp messages on sexual violence                          | 58<br>(15.8)              | 193<br>(52.4)            | -                        | 117<br>(31.8)             | -                        | 3.52                  | 1.10 |
| I see pop ups about information on sexual violence while making use of Facebook. | 218<br>(59.2)             | -                        | -                        | 45<br>(12.2)              | 105<br>(28.5)            | 3.49                  | 1.84 |
| I got to know that stalking is a form of sexual violence through social media    | 108<br>(29.3)             | 98<br>(26.6)             | 45<br>(12.2)             | 62<br>(16.8)              | 55<br>(14.9)             | 3.39                  | 1.44 |
| I have seen Twitter campaigns on sexual violence                                 | 150<br>(40.8)             | 40<br>(10.9)             | 120<br>(32.6)            | -                         | 58<br>(15.8)             | 3.17                  | 1.60 |
| Average Weighted Mean  |                           |                          |                          |                           |                          | 3.32                  | 1.50 |

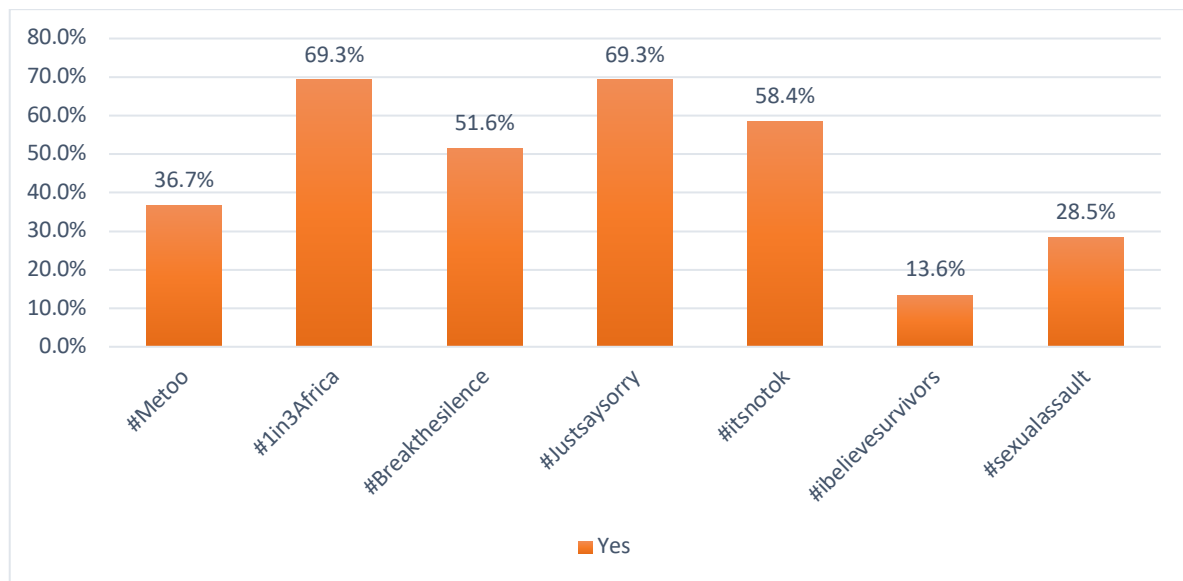


Fig. 2: Sexual violence campaigns on social media

Table 1 shows that generally, female undergraduates were moderately exposed to social media campaigns on sexual violence (Average Weighted Mean= 3.32, SD=1.50) on platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. Facebook had the highest frequency of 59.2 per cent implying that these female undergraduates are more exposed on Facebook than other social media platforms. A follow-up question was asked to identify the particular campaigns participants had seen. Fig. 2 shows some of these campaigns are #Justsaysorry (69.3 per cent ), #1in3Africa (69.3 per cent ), #itsnotok (58.4 per cent ), #Breakthesilence (51.6 per cent ); while the least seen were #Metoo (36.7 per cent ), #sexualassault (28.5 per cent ) and #believesurvivors (13.6 per cent). The study restricted its attention to these campaigns based on the results of a pilot test. Participants were familiar with these campaigns. Similarly the social media platforms included were those which participants associated with the campaigns.

From the findings of the study, female undergraduates are sufficiently informed of the different social media campaigns on sexual violence. Awareness was higher with the campaigns in Nigeria, by a Nigerian (#1in3Africa) and that launched by students (#Justsaysorry). These reflect their consumption of messages as presented by those with whom they had some affinity. The study findings align with the view of Kee (2005) who submits that the only way people can be aware of and prevent sexual violence against women is to bring in the social media and organizing campaigns. Also relevant is the conclusion of the study of Mass, McCauley, Bonomi and Leija (2018) which showed that Twitter can be used as a public platform to challenge problematic social discourse organize, and call for action/change. It is now evident as shown

below, that social media campaigns using platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp can be used among female undergraduates to set agenda on such themes as issues of sexual violence.

Research Question Two: To what extent have social media campaigns contributed to the knowledge of female undergraduates on sexual violence?

Table 2: Mean response on extent to which social media contribute to females knowledge on sexual violence

|  | SA                  | A                   | D                   | SD                  | U                   | Mean          | SD   |
|--|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------|------|
| Social Media contributions to knowledge on sexual violence   | (5)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | (4)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | (3)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | (2)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | (1)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | ( $\bar{x}$ ) |      |
| I have gained knowledge on sexual violence from social media                                       | 203<br>(55.2)       | 103<br>(28)         | 62<br>(16.8)        | -                   | -                   | 4.38          | 0.76 |
| Social media has increased my knowledge on sexual violence   | 190<br>(51.6)       | 58<br>(15.8)        | 62<br>(16.8)        | 58<br>(15.8)        | -                   | 4.03          | 1.15 |
| I found out that persistent request for sexual favors is a form of sexual violence on social media | 145<br>(39.4)       | 116<br>(31.5)       | 62<br>(16.8)        | -                   | 45<br>(12.2)        | 3.86          | 1.28 |
| Social media has helped me to know that violating someone sexually is a punishable crime           | 145<br>(39.4)       | 58<br>(15.8)        | 120<br>(32.6)       | -                   | 45<br>(12.2)        | 3.70          | 1.32 |
| Average Weighted Mean  |                     |                     |                     |                     |                     | 3.91          | 1.11 |

Table 2 shows that generally, the participants agreed that the social media campaigns contributed to their knowledge on sexual violence (Average Weighted Mean= 3.91, SD=1.11). Specifically, participants agreed that they gained knowledge on sexual

violence as a result of the social media exposure ( $\bar{x}$ = 4.38, SD=0.76), they found out that persistent request for sexual favors is a form of sexual violence on social media ( $\bar{x}$ = 3.86, SD=1.28) and social media helped them to know that violating someone sexually is a punishable crime ( $\bar{x}$ = 3.70, SD=1.32). Hall (2016), explained the relationship between the way social media platforms framed sexual violence and the perception students have about it. The study shows that the social media frames information on sexual violence, added to knowledge and improved the perception of students on the issue. This aligns with the finding of this study showing that social media adds to the knowledge of the female undergraduates who participated in the study. In other words, the media can empower individuals by providing information needed to sensitize them on important issues. In a similar vein, Quebec (n.d) submitted that the media can help create greater understanding of what sexual assault is and why it is unacceptable to cover a range of events related to sexual assault, thereby fostering an attitude of non-tolerance toward this type of violence by the public.

Research Question Three: Attitude of female undergraduates to information on sexual violence on social media.

Table 3: Mean response on attitude of females to information on sexual violence on social media

|   | SA                  | A                   | D                   | SD                  | U                   | Mean          | SD   |
|---|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------------|---------------|------|
| Attitudes of female undergrads to information on sexual violence                              | (5)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | (4)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | (3)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | (2)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | (1)<br>Freq.<br>(%) | ( $\bar{x}$ ) |      |
| I support social media groups that talk about sexual violence                                 | 145<br>(39.4)       | 161<br>(43.8)       | 62<br>(16.8)        |                     |                     | 4.23          | 0.72 |
| I willingly participate in a sexual violence campaign if I come across it on the social media | 113<br>(30.7)       | 193<br>(52.4)       | 62<br>(16.8)        |                     |                     | 4.14          | 0.68 |
| I encourage people to find fora on social media to talk                                       | 105<br>(28.5)       | 156<br>(42.4)       | 107<br>(29.1)       |                     |                     | 3.99          | 0.76 |

|   |               |               |               |                 |  |      |      |
|---|---------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|--|------|------|
| about their pains as it relates to sexual violence  |               |               |               |                 |  |      |      |
| I share information on social media about sexual assault because I believe it will help in reducing sexual violence | 95<br>(25.8)  | 153<br>(41.6) | 120<br>(32.6) |                 |  | 3.93 | 0.76 |
| I spread information on self-defense classes and prevention of sexual violence through social media                 | 105<br>(28.5) | 98<br>(26.6)  | 120<br>(32.6) | 45<br>12.2<br>) |  | 3.59 | 1.25 |
| Average Weighted Mean   |               |               |               |                 |  | 3.98 | 0.83 |

Table 3 shows that a good proportion of participants held attitudes that were favourably disposed towards information about sexual violence on social media (Average Weighted Mean= 3.98, SD=0.83). Among other points, they agreed that they supported social media groups that talked about sexual violence ( $\bar{x}$ = 4.23, SD=0.72), they would willingly participate in a sexual violence campaign if they came across it on the social media ( $\bar{x}$ = 4.14, SD=0.68). They also agreed that they use social media to spread information on prevention of sexual violence which encouraged women to take self-defense classes to protect themselves when needed. This implies that participants had positive attitude towards information about sexual violence on social media. However, the study conducted by Hall (2016), contradicts the positivity of female undergraduates attitudes. Hall explains that most of the students already know what sexual violence entails and that they are aware that universities create anti-assault movements for them but students may be unwilling to speak due to constraining sociocultural structures. Related to this is the suggestion of Quebec (n.d) on how the media can create content focusing on topics that show the broad underlying causes of sexual violence, as well as consequences of sexual assault on individuals and society. By emphasizing this, the media can help the public to gain a better grasp of this problem. As a result, the public will be more likely to perceive sexual assault as a social problem rather than a purely private matter.

Research Question Four: What is the perception of female undergraduates on the effectiveness of social media in breaking the culture of silence on sexual violence?

Table 4: Mean response on perception of the effectiveness of social media in breaking the culture of silence on sexual violence

|  | SA            | A             | D     | SD    | U            | Mean          | SD   |
|--|---------------|---------------|-------|-------|--------------|---------------|------|
| Effectiveness of social media in breaking culture of silence   | (5)           | (4)           | (3)   | (2)   | (1)          | ( $\bar{x}$ ) |      |
|  | Freq.         | Freq.         | Freq. | Freq. | Freq.        |               |      |
|  | (%)           | (%)           | (%)   | (%)   | (%)          |               |      |
| Social media is an effective tool for breaking the culture of silence on sexual violence.                        | 368<br>(100)  |               |       |       |              | 5.00          | 0.00 |
| Social media reduces communication barrier on the issues of sexual violence                                      | 225<br>(61.1) | 143<br>(38.9) |       |       |              | 4.61          | 0.49 |
| Social media help people express their experiences and at the same time call for justice                         | 207<br>(56.3) | 103<br>(28)   |       |       | 58<br>(15.8) | 4.09          | 1.41 |
| There is a growing awareness created among sexually assaulted people that keeping silence causes more damage     | 167<br>(45.4) | 143<br>(38.9) |       |       | 58<br>(15.8) | 3.98          | 1.37 |
| I feel that through public enlightenment in the social media, the myths about sexual violence is being destroyed | 225<br>(61.1) | 40<br>(10.9)  |       |       | 103<br>(28)  | 3.77          | 1.76 |
| Average Weighted Mean  |               |               |       |       |              | 4.29          | 1.00 |

Table 4 shows that there was strong agreement amongst participants that social media are effective in breaking the culture of sexual violence (Average Weighted Mean= 4.29, SD=1.00). Participants agreed that social media are effective tools for

breaking the culture of silence on sexual violence ( $\bar{x}$ = 5.00, SD=0.00), they reduce communication barriers on the issues of sexual violence ( $\bar{x}$ = 4.61, SD=0.49), help people express their experiences and call for justice ( $\bar{x}$ = 4.61, SD=0.49). Respondents agreed that through public enlightenment in the social media, myths about sexual violence are being destroyed ( $\bar{x}$ = 3.77, SD=1.76). From the different campaigns reviewed in the study, different myths on sexual violence exist including "It is all my fault".

Social media platforms have been used to carry messages to counter these. Findings of earlier studies, (Bivens and Dawson, 2013), showed that social media are the most appropriate tools for breaking the culture of silence. Lending credence to this view is the recent BBC exposé which provoked a huge response on social media especially among Twitter users condemning the actions while others shared their own alleged experiences. By featuring a female journalist who shared her own experience of university harassment in the documentary, many other females have been emboldened to share their experiences of alleged harassment with the BBC (BBC, 2019). This idea was also reinforced by Quebec (n.d) who suggested that by talking about resources, the media can break down the myth that sexual assault is an individual problem that should be managed solely by the people concerned i.e. the victims, their family and friends, and the perpetrators. The media can contribute to reducing the perceptions among victims and perpetrators of being alone and unable to find help.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

While the study has focused on how social media has been effective in creating awareness, improving knowledge, changing attitudes and discouraging the culture of silence among female undergraduates, it cannot conclude that the social media and social media campaigns can eradicate this menace completely. The study acknowledges the power of the traditional mass media—radio, television and the print media. A World Health Organisation source has shown that these media along with outdoor media—billboards, public transport—have been employed to change public attitudes towards sexual violence (WHO.INT, n.d:168). However, the weakness of traditional media in their handling of these sensitive issues remain. Thus, a better and well-coordinated approach that includes the use of social media alongside traditional media in forging ahead with such campaigns and causes is advocated.

Therefore, it is not surprising that this study finds that Facebook ranks highest among the social media platforms exposing female undergraduates to information on sexual violence; they are also conversant with Twitter campaigns especially #Justsaysorry and #1in3Africa. Given the fact that the participants of this study, being female



undergraduates can relate with American college students. It is not surprising that the #Justsaysorry campaign founded by university students like them, is well-known to them. Participants may have had similar experiences as that of the campaigners and are therefore in support of the initiative. Similarly, it is not surprising that participants are well familiar with the #1in3Africa which is a project of a young and prominent Nigerian (Olori Wuraola Ogunwusi) launched in a media visible location—Ikoyi, Lagos State. It may be concluded that local campaigns and institutional-based or directed campaigns will be more effective in breaking the culture of silence on sexual violence among college students. In other words, young females may be more responsive to campaigns launched by people within their age group, geographical location and with whom they share similar social aspirations.

Participants had learnt specifically that persistent request for sexual favors is a form of sexual violence on social media and violating someone sexually is a punishable crime. Attitude of participants to information on sexual violence was found to be positive as they are willing to participate in social media campaigns on sexual violence; they also spread information on prevention of sexual violence. In addition, participants agreed that social media are effective in breaking the culture of sexual violence as they have reduced communication barrier on the issues of sexual violence, helped people express their experiences and at the same time call for justice. Finally, respondents agreed that through public enlightenment on social media platforms, the myths about sexual violence are gradually being destroyed. In conclusion, the study found that most of the information and knowledge female undergraduates have on sexual violence is as a result of the involvement of social media.

It is recommended that

- i. Although participants in this study are well informed through *Facebook* posts, another (McCauley et. al, 2018) with regard to social media reactions to the BBC Sex for Grades documentary have shown *Twitter* as the most deployed social media platform for users' reaction to sexual violence. Thus it has been demonstrated that this public platform can be used to organize and challenge problematic social discourses such as sexual violence. This study recommends that social media advocacy groups note this potential and take full advantage of social media when transferring new knowledge or trends on sexual violence.
- ii. The study suggests that campaigns against sexual violence, including those targeted at institutions, may be more effective in addressing sexual violence, when audiences can identify points of resonance – affinity with speakers or local proximity to issues. The study recommends a critical look at these possibilities in advancing future campaigns. When they are the target

audience, female undergraduates could be involved in content design rather than merely being targeted as mere end users of information.

- iii. Attitude of female undergraduates to information on sexual violence show that they are positively disposed to act. It is therefore important that social media advocacy groups including individuals, government, and NGOs make concerted efforts that promote action within their reasonable limits.
- iv. Social media advocacy groups should explore new ways of making the campaigns more effective until consistent decline in the incidents of sexual violence among females. One of such could be to localize the campaign by using well-known figures or familiar personalities in advancing the cause. Also, female undergraduates should be encouraged to use the social media materials available to push their case.

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