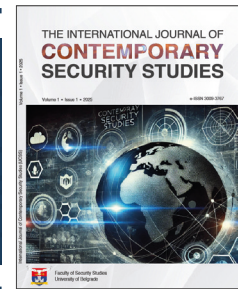




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Internet Fraud, Human Trafficking, and the Youth Question in Warri Metropolis: An Integrated Empirical Analysis

Edafe Ulo^{1*}, Richard Abayomi Aborisade²

¹ Department of Sociology/Criminology, Dennis Osadebay University, Asaba, Delta State, Nigeria; ulo.edafe@dou.edu.ng / uloedafe@gmail.com

² Department of Sociology, Olabisi Onabanjo University, P.M.B. 2002, Ago Iwoye, Ogun State, Nigeria; aborisade.richard@oouagowiwoye.edu.ng

*Correspondence: ulo.edafe@dou.edu.ng; tel.: +2348163887134

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the interrelationship between internet fraud and human trafficking among youths in Warri metropolis, Delta State, Nigeria. Guided by Routine Activity Theory, the research investigates how socioeconomic conditions — particularly unemployment and weak law enforcement — create environments that facilitate both offenses. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 389 respondents purposively sampled from identified youth clusters in Warri. Variables were operationalized at the ordinal level using Likert-type scales, and Spearman's rank-order correlation was employed to test the hypotheses. Findings reveal statistically significant associations between unemployment and internet fraud participation ($r_s = 0.442$, $p < 0.01$), weak law enforcement and the prevalence of human trafficking ($r_s = 0.371$, $p < 0.01$), and digital facilitation and trafficking recruitment ($r_s = 0.491$, $p < 0.01$). The study demonstrates that both offenses share overlapping structural enablers, with digital platforms increasingly serving as a conduit linking fraud networks to trafficking operations. The conclusion recommends integrated policy responses addressing youth economic inclusion, digital literacy, and strengthened law enforcement. The study contributes an empirically grounded, integrated framework to the literature on cybercrime and trafficking in Nigeria.

KEYWORDS

Internet fraud, human trafficking, cybercrime, routine activity theory, youth, Warri Metropolis, and Nigeria.

1. Introduction

The twin phenomena of internet fraud and human trafficking represent two of the most pressing criminal challenges confronting Nigerian society in the twenty-first century. While these offenses have traditionally been examined in isolation, emerging evidence from law enforcement and academic scholarship suggests that they share structural conditions that simultaneously facilitate



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both, and that digital technologies are increasingly mediating the nexus between them (Ojedokun & Eraye, 2012; Europol, 2020). Warri metropolis, located in Delta State, Nigeria, offers a particularly instructive site for such an integrated inquiry, given its history of youth unemployment, its position as a commercial hub, and the documented prevalence of organized crime networks within its urban economy (Eboibi, 2019).

This study departs from prior single-offense analyses by constructing an integrated analytical framework that treats internet fraud and human trafficking not as independent phenomena, but as co-constituted criminal adaptations to shared structural conditions. Specifically, the study seeks to: 1) establish the relationship between unemployment and youth participation in internet fraud in Warri; 2) examine how weak law enforcement capacity contributes to the persistence of human trafficking in the metropolis; and 3) explore the degree to which digital communication platforms function as a connective medium linking fraud networks to trafficking operations.

The study is grounded in Routine Activity Theory (Cohen & Felson, 1979) as its primary theoretical framework, and employs a quantitative survey design to test three directional hypotheses. In doing so, it responds to gaps in the existing Nigerian literature, which has largely treated cybercrime and trafficking as separate regulatory and academic domains. The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows: Section 2 reviews the relevant literature; Section 3 outlines the theoretical framework; Section 4 presents the methodology; Section 5 reports the findings; Section 6 discusses the findings; and Section 7 concludes with policy recommendations.

Ayoola, Avenda, Ulo, and Olaniyi (2024) maintained that Internet fraud and human trafficking constitute two pervasive and increasingly intersecting forms of transnational organized crime that threaten the socio-economic stability and human security of Nigeria, with particular severity in urban centers such as Warri metropolis, situated as a strategic commercial and industrial hub in Delta State. Warri exhibits structural conditions characterized by high youth unemployment, entrenched poverty, and institutionalized governance deficits that collectively generate a criminogenic environment conducive to both phenomena (Omolaoye, 2023). Notwithstanding the implementation of legislative frameworks and institutional oversight aim to curb this crime, such as the Cybercrimes (Prohibition, Prevention, etc.) Act 2015, the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act 2015, and the operations of Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC, 2015) and the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP, 2020) these criminal activities has remained persist with remarkable resilience. This persistence suggests a fundamental misalignment between extant policy responses and the underlying aetiological drivers of the crimes (Kalanj, 2025; Petrović, 2025; Vidović & Beriša, 2025), thereby necessitating empirically grounded inquiry into the structural and institutional mechanisms that sustain them.

The escalation of internet fraud—colloquially designated “Yahoo Yahoo” among Warri’s youth population in the Nigerian context—warrants particular scholarly attention. The proliferation of digital infrastructure and the democratization of internet access have substantially lowered the barriers to entry for cybercriminal engagement, rendering fraudulent activity an economically rational alternative for young people excluded from formal labor markets (Chikwendu, Oli, & Ohazulike, 2023). Beyond its direct financial harms, internet fraud inflicts significant reputational externalities upon the Nigerian state, eroding international trust and complicating legitimate economic transactions for citizens abroad (Tade & Aliyu, 2011; Ulo, 2023). Of greater concern is the emerging evidence that proceeds from internet fraud increasingly serve as venture capital for other criminal enterprises, notably human trafficking networks that exploit digital platforms for victim recruitment, logistical coordination, and the obfuscation of illicit financial flows (Ulo, 2025). This criminal nexus remains insufficiently theorized in the extant literature, particularly with respect to how localized economic precarity in specific urban contexts mediates the transition from cybercrime to trafficking-related activities.

Concurrently, human trafficking in Warri manifests through the city’s dual function as both a transit corridor and a terminal destination within broader trafficking architectures. Traffickers systematically exploit the socio-economic vulnerabilities of marginalized populations—particularly women, children, and undocumented migrants—leveraging high poverty indices and limited educational attainment to engineer consent through deceitful employment propositions and spurious

promises of improved livelihoods abroad (Ayoola, Avenda, Ulo, and Olaniyi, 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2013). The digitization of trafficking operations has further compounded enforcement difficulties; the anonymity afforded by encrypted communication platforms and social media networks enables traffickers to circumvent traditional detection methods while maintaining coercive control over victims across jurisdictional boundaries. Despite the nominal existence of anti-trafficking statutes and institutional mandates, enforcement remains systematically compromised by resource constraints, inter-agency coordination failures, and, in certain documented instances, the complicity of enforcement personnel (Ramli, Nashril-Abaidah, & Ramli, 2025). The resultant climate of impunity not only perpetuates trafficking victimization but also signals to prospective offenders that the expected costs of criminal engagement remain insufficiently prohibitive.

The foregoing conditions generate a critical research imperative. Existing scholarship has tended to examine internet fraud and human trafficking as discrete phenomena, neglecting their operational convergence in specific urban ecologies and the shared structural determinants—unemployment, institutional weakness, technological affordances—that enable their co-occurrence. Furthermore, the empirical literature on Warri metropolis specifically remains sparse, with most studies privileging Lagos, Abuja, or Port Harcourt as primary sites of inquiry. Consequently, the mechanisms through which high unemployment propels youth engagement in internet fraud and how inadequate law enforcement capacity facilitates the perpetration of human trafficking remain inadequately specified for this context. This study, therefore, seeks to address these lacunae by investigating the relational dynamics between these structural variables and criminal outcomes in the Warri metropolis, to generate context-sensitive evidence to inform targeted policy interventions and institutional reform.

The general objective of the study is to examine internet fraud and human trafficking in contemporary Nigeria: A study of Warri metropolis. The specific objectives are to:

1. Determine the impact of high unemployment on youths' engagement in internet fraud in Warri metropolis.
2. Examine the impact of inadequate law enforcement in the perpetration of human trafficking in the Warri metropolis.
3. Explore the degree to which digital communication platforms function as a connective medium linking fraud networks to trafficking operations.

Based on the stated objectives, the study formulates the following research hypotheses to empirically examine the relationships between the selected structural factors and the identified criminal phenomena in Warri metropolis.

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between high unemployment and youths' engagement in internet fraud in Warri metropolis.
2. There is no significant relationship between inadequate law enforcement and the perpetration of human trafficking in Warri metropolis.
3. There is no significant relationship between digital facilitation and trafficking recruitment in Warri metropolis.

1.1. Literature Review

Conceptual Clarification

A foundational challenge in this domain is the conceptual conflation of related but distinct phenomena. For analytical rigor, this study distinguishes among four related concepts. Internet fraud refers to deceptive schemes executed via digital platforms — including advance-fee fraud, romance scams, and business email compromise — that exploit victims financially without necessarily involving coercion or physical movement (Wall, 2007). Cybercrime, a broader category, encompasses any criminal act in which computer systems or networks are either the instrument or the target of the offense; internet fraud is therefore a sub-category of cybercrime (Broadhurst et al., 2014).

Human trafficking, by contrast, is defined under the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (2015) and the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons (2000) as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons through force, fraud, or coercion for exploitation. This definition explicitly requires three elements: act, means, and purpose. Cyber-facilitated trafficking, the fourth concept, refers to the use of digital platforms — including social media, encrypted messaging applications, and fraudulent online job advertisements — as instruments through which traffickers recruit, deceive, control, or commercially exploit victims (Latonero, 2011; International Organization for Migration, 2018). This study focuses primarily on internet fraud and human trafficking while acknowledging cyber-facilitated trafficking as the emergent interface between them.

Internet Fraud in the Nigerian Context

Nigeria occupies a prominent position in global cybercrime discourse, partly due to the international visibility of advance-fee fraud (colloquially known as “419” fraud) and its evolved successors (Smith, 2009). Scholarly work on the phenomenon has shifted from treating it as a purely individual moral failure to examining its structural underpinnings. Tade and Aliyu (2011) demonstrated that peer networks and perceived impunity play significant roles in the initiation of youth into internet fraud in southwestern Nigeria. Similarly, Adomi et al. (2004) found that inadequate regulation of internet cafés in Warri created low-risk environments for the commission of online fraud.

Importantly, recent scholarship has moved beyond descriptive typologies to interrogate the social conditions that sustain these activities. Ngo and Jaishankar (2017) argue that structural unemployment displaces the opportunity costs associated with criminal participation, effectively lowering barriers to entry into fraud networks. This insight is critically relevant to Warri, where youth unemployment rates have been estimated at above 40% in some assessments, and where legitimate economic opportunities in the oil sector have contracted sharply following production disruptions (Ibaba, 2011). Rather than merely summarising prior studies, this review identifies a persistent gap: the failure to link fraud participation empirically to co-occurring trafficking in contexts where criminal networks increasingly overlap.

Human Trafficking in the Niger Delta

Human trafficking in the Niger Delta region has been well documented at the descriptive level, with studies identifying Edo and Delta States as among the most significant source and transit zones in West Africa (Agbu, 2003; Okojie et al., 2003). Female internal trafficking for domestic labor and sexual exploitation, as well as male trafficking for forced labor on fishing vessels and in agriculture, represent the dominant patterns observed. Warri, as a major commercial node, functions as both a destination and a transit point for trafficked persons (NAPTIP, 2020).

Critically, the literature on trafficking in this region has paid insufficient attention to the role of digital enablement. Obokata (2006) identifies weak institutional capacity — including inadequate victim identification protocols and limited prosecution of traffickers — as a central sustaining condition. This aligns with broader critiques of law enforcement responses across sub-Saharan Africa, where anti-trafficking units are routinely under-resourced and susceptible to corruption (Iyanda, 2012). What is less theorized is how fraud networks are being repurposed for trafficking recruitment, a convergence that this study directly addresses.

Identifying the Research Gap

A systematic review of the available literature reveals that while both internet fraud and human trafficking have been studied extensively as separate phenomena in Nigeria, empirical work examining their structural convergence in specific urban contexts remains sparse. The present study addresses this gap by testing the hypothesis that both offenses are jointly sustained by common structural enablers — unemployment and weak law enforcement and by exploring the digital interfaces through which fraud networks increasingly intersect with trafficking operations in Warri metropolis.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Routine Activity Theory (RAT), originally formulated by Cohen and Felson (1979), as its primary theoretical lens. RAT posits that the convergence in time and space of three elements is a necessary condition for crime to occur: a motivated offender, a suitable target, and the absence of a capable guardian. The theory's strength lies in its structural orientation — it does not require any assumptions about individual criminality, but instead focuses on the environmental and situational conditions that enable criminal acts.

In the context of internet fraud in Warri, motivated offenders can be understood as unemployed or underemployed youth who, facing limited licit alternatives, are drawn into fraud networks by peer associations and the perceived low risk of detection. Suitable targets are online victims — both domestic and international — identified through social engineering, often via social media platforms. The absence of capable guardianship is evidenced by the limited capacity of the Nigerian Police Force's cybercrime unit and the nascent enforcement of the Cybercrime (Prohibition, Prevention, Etc). Act (2015), and the inadequacy of digital literacy programs that might make potential victims more resilient.

For human trafficking, the RAT mapping is equally productive. Traffickers constitute motivated offenders seeking profit through exploitation. Suitable targets are economically vulnerable young people, particularly women and girls, who respond to fraudulent offers of employment or educational opportunity, which are increasingly circulated through digital platforms. Capable guardianship is absent due to chronically under-resourced anti-trafficking units, permeable border controls, and community-level failure to recognize or report trafficking indicators.

Critically, RAT also explains the digital convergence between these two offenses. Online platforms reduce the spatial and temporal constraints that historically limited crime: a fraudster operating in Warri can simultaneously defraud a victim in Europe and recruit a trafficking victim in a rural Delta community, using the same digital infrastructure. The theory thus provides an integrated explanatory structure for both offenses and for the nexus between them, making it the appropriate lens for this study.

3. Methodology

The study adopts a cross-sectional survey design, which is appropriate for examining the distribution and covariation of variables within a defined population at a single point in time (Bryman, 2016). This design is suited to the study's objectives of establishing associations among unemployment, weak law enforcement, internet fraud, and human trafficking among youths in the Warri metropolis. The study population comprises young persons between the ages of 18 and 35 residing in Warri metropolis, the operational definition of "youth" adopted here in accordance with the National Youth Policy of Nigeria (2019), which sets the youth bracket at 15–35 years, with this study limited to adults aged 18 and above for ethical and legal reasons. While a precise census figure for this sub-population is unavailable, the 2006 National Population Commission census and projected growth rates estimate the total population of the Warri metropolitan area at approximately 680,000 persons, with youth (18–35) constituting an estimated 35–40%, yielding an approximate population of 238,000 to 272,000 (NPC, 2006).

A sample size of 389 was determined using the Cochran (1977) formula for proportions: $n = Z^2pq / e^2$, where $Z = 1.96$ (95% confidence level), $p = 0.50$ (maximum variability assumed), $q = 0.50$, and $e = 0.05$ (margin of error). This yields: $n = (1.96)^2(0.5)(0.5) / (0.05)^2 = 3.8416 \times 0.25 / 0.0025 = 388.16$, rounded to 389.

Purposive sampling was employed to ensure that respondents had either direct knowledge of, or exposure to, the phenomena under study. The rationale for purposive sampling, rather than a probabilistic approach, is grounded in the sensitive and stigmatized nature of the topic: random sampling in the general population would likely yield a high proportion of respondents with no knowledge of either offense, reducing the substantive utility of the data. Purposive selection criteria

required respondents to: (a) be between 18 and 35 years of age; (b) have resided in Warri metropolis for a minimum of two years; and (c) be identifiable through one or more community-based networks associated with digital entrepreneurship, informal commercial activity, or youth civic organizations. Participants were recruited from five key areas within the metropolis — Okumagba Layout, Ekurede-Itsekiri, Effurun, Agbarho Junction, and the Warri Central Market environs — which were identified through preliminary fieldwork as zones of concentrated youth economic activity.

Data were collected via a structured questionnaire developed by the researchers. The instrument comprised four sections: Section A captured demographic information (age, gender, educational attainment, and employment status). Section B measured perceptions of unemployment as a driver of internet fraud (8 items). Section C measured perceptions of law enforcement weakness as a driver of human trafficking (8 items). Section D explored awareness of digital platform use in facilitating both offenses (6 items).

All substantive items in Sections B through D were measured using a five-point Likert-type scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 5 = Strongly Agree), producing ordinal-level data. Composite scale scores were computed by summing item responses within each dimension. Internal consistency of each scale was assessed using Cronbach's alpha: unemployment/fraud scale ($\alpha = 0.81$), law enforcement/trafficking scale ($\alpha = 0.78$), and digital facilitation scale ($\alpha = 0.74$), all exceeding the conventional threshold of 0.70. The questionnaire was face-validated by three academic experts in criminology and sociology, and a pilot test was conducted with 30 respondents outside the final sample.

Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations) were used to summarise demographic and scale data. Given that the composite scores are ordinal (summed Likert items), Spearman's rank-order correlation (r_s) was selected as the appropriate non-parametric test for hypotheses involving ordinal variables (Field, 2018). This represents a deliberate departure from Spearman's rank-order correlation, which assumes interval-level measurement and normal distribution — conditions that cannot be reliably claimed for Likert-based composite scores in this context. All analyses were conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 26, with statistical significance set at $p < .05$.

4. Results

This section is based on the analysis and reports of the data to be translated into meaningful information that would allow for meaningful judgments and decisions; this will begin with the reporting of the socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents, followed by the testing of the various hypotheses that were generated for the study.

A total of 400 questionnaires were administered to the respondents; however, only 389 copies of the research instrument were retrieved, with 11 copies lost. This shows that 97% of the instruments were recovered and 3% lost. The analysis was therefore based on the figure of 389 retrieved questionnaires.

Table 1. *Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents. Source: Fieldwork, 2025.*

Variables	Categories	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Sex	Male	215	55.3
	Female	174	44.7
Age (years)	18–25	84	21.6
	26–30	105	27.0
	31–35	200	51.4
Educational status	Educated	285	73.3
	Uneducated	104	26.7
Employment status	Employed	143	36.8
	Unemployed	246	63.2
Total		389	100.0

The socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents who took part in the survey are shown in Table 1. The male respondents were 55.3 percent, and the female respondents were 44.7 percent. The age distribution of the survey participants shows that 21.6 percent are between 18 and 25 years old, 27.0 percent are between 26 and 30 years old, and 51.4 percent are between 30 and 35 years old. The respondents' educational status revealed that 73 percent were educated, and 27 percent were uneducated. The respondents' employment status revealed that 36.8 percent are in active employment and 63.2 percent were unemployed.

Hypothesis 1

There is no significant relationship between high unemployment and youths' engagement in internet fraud in Warri metropolis.

Table 2. *Spearman's rho: Correlation between High Unemployment and Youths' Engagement in Internet Fraud.*

Variable	1	2
1. High unemployment	—	0.442**
2. Youths' engagement in internet fraud	0.442**	—

Note. $N = 389$. $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$.

In Table 2, it can be observed that the Spearman correlation coefficient r_s is 0.442 and that it is significant at $p = 0.01$ (suggesting that as unemployment levels rise, there is a corresponding increase in the involvement of youth in internet-related fraudulent activities). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected, confirming that unemployment is a meaningful predictor of internet fraud engagement. This shows a significant relationship between high unemployment and youth engagement in internet fraud in the Warri metropolis. This value reflects a 'moderate positive relationship', suggesting that as unemployment levels rise, there is a corresponding increase in the involvement of youth in internet-related fraudulent activities. This result aligned with the structural opportunity theory of crime (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) and with prior studies (Tade & Aliyu, 2011; Ngo & Jaisankar, 2017). Unemployment drives youths to engage in internet fraud, as individuals rationalize and innovate ways to adapt to constrained structural opportunities, particularly in situations where economic regulation and digital governance are weak or poorly enforced. The data provides clear empirical support for the link between economic idleness and the prevalence of cybercrime in the region.

Hypothesis 2

There is no significant relationship between inadequate law enforcement and the perpetration of human trafficking in Warri metropolis.

Table 3. Spearman's rho: Correlation between Inadequate Law Enforcement and Perpetration of Human Trafficking.

Variable	1	2
1. Inadequate law enforcement	—	0.371**
2. Perpetration of human trafficking	0.371**	—

Note. $N = 389$. $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$.

In Table 3, the Spearman correlation coefficient r_s is 0.491 and is significant at $p = 0.01$ (implying less than a 1% probability that this observed association is due to chance). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected. This can be interpreted to mean that there is a significant relationship between inadequate law enforcement and the perpetration of human trafficking in Warri metropolis. This coefficient indicates a weak-to-moderate positive correlation, suggesting that as law enforcement inadequacies increase, there is a corresponding rise in the incidence of human trafficking. This result aligned with Obokata (2006) and Iyanda (2012), who recorded systemic deficiencies in Nigerian anti-trafficking enforcement, including inadequate capacity for victim identification, corruption within enforcement agencies, and a failure to prosecute traffickers at rates that would constitute a meaningful deterrent. The data provides empirical evidence that gaps in law enforcement are a significant factor contributing to the perpetration of human trafficking in the study area.

Hypothesis 3

There is no significant relationship between digital facilitation and trafficking recruitment in the Warri metropolis.

Table 4. Spearman's rho: Correlation between Digital Facilitation and Trafficking Recruitment.

Variable	1	2
1. Digital facilitation	—	0.491**
2. Trafficking recruitment	0.491**	—

Note. $N = 389$. $p < 0.05$; $p < 0.01$.

In Table 4, the Spearman correlation coefficient r_s is 0.491 and is significant at $p = 0.01$ (suggesting that the probability of this relationship occurring by chance is virtually non-existent). This means that the null hypothesis is rejected. This can be interpreted to mean that there is a significant relationship between digital facilitation and trafficking recruitment in the Warri metropolis. This result indicates a moderate positive correlation, implying that as the use of digital tools and platforms for facilitation increases, there is a distinct upward trend in trafficking recruitment efforts. This result corresponds with Latonero's (2011) and IOM's (2018) findings that internet fraud networks in the Niger Delta are being repurposed and extended into trafficking operations, with social media, encrypted messaging, and fraudulent digital job advertisements serving as tools of recruitment and victim management. The data provides strong empirical evidence that digital facilitation plays a critical role in the recruitment process of human trafficking within the study area.

5. Discussion

The findings of this study carry implications that go beyond the statistical associations reported. At a substantive level, they reveal how structural conditions in Warri metropolis create a criminogenic environment in which internet fraud and human trafficking are not coincidental co-occurrences but structurally co-produced adaptations to the same underlying social conditions.

The strong correlation between unemployment and internet fraud participation ($r_s = 0.442$) is consistent with the structural opportunity theory of crime (Cloward & Ohlin, 1960) and with prior Nigerian studies (Tade & Aliyu, 2011; Ngo & Jaishankar, 2017). However, the Warri context adds specificity: nearly half of respondents (46.1%) identify as unemployed, and formal employment options in the oil sector are increasingly precarious. The displacement of opportunity costs that Ngo and Jaishankar (2017) theorize is not a marginal condition but a structural norm for the majority of urban youth. Critically, the data suggest that this is not simply a matter of individual moral failure

but of rational adaptation within a constrained opportunity structure — exactly what RAT predicts when capable guardianship (enforcement, economic regulation, digital governance) is absent.

The significant relationship between weak law enforcement and human trafficking prevalence ($r_s = 0.371$) similarly invites structural, rather than purely behavioral, interpretation. Obokata (2006) and Iyanda (2012) have documented systemic deficiencies in Nigerian anti-trafficking enforcement, including inadequate capacity for victim identification, corruption within enforcement agencies, and a failure to prosecute traffickers at rates that would constitute a meaningful deterrent. The Warri data affirm these deficiencies at a local level: respondents overwhelmingly perceived law enforcement as unable or unwilling to disrupt trafficking operations effectively. Importantly, this perception itself has criminogenic consequences — where impunity is perceived as probable, the deterrent effect of law is neutralized, encouraging new entrants into trafficking networks.

The third finding — the significant correlation between digital facilitation and significant digital facilitation ($r_s = 0.491$) — is perhaps the most theoretically novel contribution of this study. It provides empirical grounding for what has previously been argued largely anecdotally: that internet fraud networks in the Niger Delta are being repurposed and extended into trafficking operations, with social media, encrypted messaging, and fraudulent digital job advertisements serving as tools of recruitment and victim management (Latonero, 2011; IOM, 2018). This convergence demands an integrated policy response rather than siloed interventions targeting each offense independently.

Taken together, these findings suggest that Warri represents a case of compound institutional failure: the absence of economic opportunity, the failure of law enforcement, and the absence of digital governance create simultaneous pathways into both internet fraud and human trafficking. Policy responses that address only one dimension — for example, cybercrime prosecution without youth economic programming — are structurally inadequate to the complexity of the problem documented here.

6. Conclusion

This study has demonstrated, through empirical analysis grounded in Routine Activity Theory, that internet fraud and human trafficking in Warri metropolis share structural enablers — principally unemployment and weak law enforcement — and that digital platforms increasingly serve as the medium through which fraud networks intersect with trafficking operations. These findings make a specific and bounded contribution to the Nigerian criminology literature: they establish, in a defined urban setting using verifiable quantitative methods, the co-constitution of two offenses that are typically treated in isolation.

The empirical evidence supports three targeted policy recommendations. First, the National Directorate of Employment and relevant state agencies should implement vocational and digital-skills programs specifically designed for 18–35-year-olds in Warri, reducing the structural push into fraud networks by expanding licit economic opportunities. Second, the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) and NPC should increase the resource allocation, training, and accountability mechanisms of anti-trafficking and cybercrime units operating in Delta State, directly addressing the impunity conditions identified by respondents. Third, digital platform regulation — including partnership with social media companies to detect and remove fraudulent job advertisements and recruitment content — should be accelerated, targeting the digital interface between fraud and trafficking documented in Hypothesis 3.

This study is not without limitations. The purposive sampling design, while appropriate for a sensitive and hard-to-reach population, limits the generalisability of findings to the broader Warri youth population, and further limits claims to national representativeness. Future research should consider mixed-methods designs that complement survey data with in-depth interviews with law enforcement officials, NAPTIP officers, and survivor-witnesses to deepen the causal analysis beyond structural correlation. Longitudinal designs would further allow examination of whether policy interventions targeting the identified structural conditions produce measurable reductions in both offenses over time.

7. Declarative Artificial Utilization

During the preparation of this work, the author used Consensus and ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-5, 2025 edition) to enhance the clarity, technical precision, and academic tone of the manuscript. The tool was employed solely to source for related literature, refine language, improve logical flow, and ensure consistency with professional academic standards. After using these tools, the authors thoroughly reviewed, verified, and edited the content to ensure accuracy, analytical soundness, and compliance with ethical and scholarly standards. The author takes full responsibility for all content and interpretations presented in the published manuscript.

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