

Digital Skills, Child Sexual Abuse Disclosure, and Social Work Practice among Women in Enugu North, Nigeria

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Abstract

Digital skills are vital for enabling women to disclose child sexual abuse via technology, mitigating stigma-related fears and barriers. This cross-sectional survey study examined the influence of digital skills on child sexual abuse (CSA) disclosure among 200 women in Enugu North Senatorial Zone, Nigeria, exploring implications for social work practice. Using convenience sampling from markets, churches, women's groups, and online networks, data were collected via structured interviewer-administered and online questionnaires assessing socio-demographics, digital skills (basic/advanced), CSA experiences, disclosure patterns, barriers, and children's online exposure. Descriptive statistics and Pearson correlation analysis ($p < 0.05$) revealed that 75% of women had basic digital skills, 35% reported personal CSA history (with 40% disclosing informally), and higher digital skills significantly correlated with greater disclosure likelihood ($r = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$). Barriers included stigma, fear, low literacy, and privacy concerns, despite recognized benefits like anonymous online support. We recommend social work-led interventions, including community digital literacy training for women caregivers, trauma-informed online counseling, stigma-reduction advocacy, and policy integration of safe digital reporting tools to enhance CSA disclosure, child protection, and service access in low-resource settings.

Keywords: child sexual abuse; disclosure; digital skills; women's health; online support; Nigeria

Background

Child sexual abuse (CSA) constitutes a pervasive global public health crisis, affecting millions of children annually and producing devastating lifelong consequences. The World Health Organization estimates that 120 million girls under 20 - about 1 in 10 globally - have experienced forced sexual contact, while boys face underreported but significant victimization (Finkelhor et al., 2014). Victims suffer profound physical injuries, mental health disorders (depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder), social dysfunction, substance use disorders, and sexual and reproductive health complications that persist into adulthood (Easton et al., 2019; Ullman, 2017; Maniglio, 2009). These outcomes generate substantial healthcare, criminal justice, and productivity costs, underscoring CSA's role as a barrier to Sustainable Development Goal 16.2 (ending violence against children).

In Nigeria, the crisis assumes epidemic proportions within a sociocultural context that amplifies vulnerability. National surveys indicate that 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 10 boys experience sexual violence before age 18, with Enugu State data confirming adolescent prevalence rates exceeding 30% (Chime et al., 2021; Ifayomi et al., 2024; National Population Commission [Nigeria] & ICF, 2018). Patriarchal norms, economic dependence, early marriage practices, and weak child-protection systems compound risks, particularly in southeastern communities where female caregivers shoulder primary childcare responsibilities (Fawole & Ajuwon, 2019). Adult women survivors face intersectional stigma intersecting gender, economic precarity, and religious conservatism, linking CSA histories to chronic mental health burdens and impaired parenting capacity (Ajuwon et al., 2022).

Disclosure emerges as the critical gateway connecting survivors to medical care, psychosocial support, and legal protection - essential for breaking cycles of violence (Alaggia et al., 2018). Yet globally, over 70% of CSA survivors never disclose formally, with delays averaging 18 years (London et al., 2005; Smith et al., 2016). Nigerian women confront amplified barriers, including fear of retaliation, victim-blaming, familial dishonor, religious stigma, and disbelief, particularly within collectivist cultures that prioritize family reputation over individual justice (Ullman, 2017; Fontes & Plummer, 2010). For female caregivers,

non-disclosure cripples child-protection capacity, perpetuating intergenerational trauma transmission - a core concern for social work (Testa et al., 2011).

Digital technologies offer transformative potential for circumventing these barriers through anonymity, geographic independence, and 24-hour accessibility. Platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook groups, Twitter-based helplines, and anonymous web forums enable discreet help-seeking where face-to-face services remain stigmatized, under-resourced, or geographically distant (Gibson et al., 2019; Jonker et al., 2021). Online peer support has proven particularly effective for multiply marginalized women, providing validation absent from traditional gatekeepers (Baker et al., 2020). However, children's escalating digital immersion - Nigeria's youth internet penetration now exceeds 50% - introduces parallel risks, including online grooming, sextortion, pornography exposure, and technology-facilitated abuse (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2018; WeProtect Global Alliance, 2023; Internet Watch Foundation, 2024).

This dual-edged digital landscape reveals a critical caregiver competency gap. Nigerian studies document that children routinely surpass mothers' digital skills, especially in low-resource households where women prioritize survival over digital literacy (Okeke et al., 2020; Onyebuchi et al., 2022). Caregivers unconsciously expose children to harm by handing over phones and tablets without safety configurations, monitoring, or emergency-response capacity, exacerbating vulnerabilities in unsupervised digital environments (UNICEF Nigeria, 2023). Enugu State research confirms adolescent CSA rates that rival national highs, yet the role of digital communication in timely disclosure remains underexplored (Chime et al., 2021; Nwankwo et al., 2023).

Existing international research highlights technology's potential to facilitate disclosure, but Africa-specific examinations remain scarce. Similarly, no studies in southeastern Nigeria have examined how maternal digital proficiency shapes CSA disclosure patterns - both their own experiences and abuse involving children in their care - nor have they explored social work interventions that could bridge this gap. Policy frameworks such as Nigeria's Violence Against Persons Prohibition Act (2015) and the National Digital Strategy lack implementation guidance for digital CSA reporting, leaving practitioners without evidence-based tools.

To address these challenges systematically, this study pursued four specific objectives grounded in identified literature gaps (Okeke et al., 2020; Chime et al., 2021). First, to assess the level of digital skill awareness and competency among women in Enugu North Senatorial

Zone. Second, to identify factors constraining women's ability to use digital skills to disclose CSA, including stigma and literacy gaps (Ullman, 2017; Easton et al., 2019). Third, to examine the perceived impacts of digital skills on CSA disclosure and help-seeking. Fourth, to evaluate the roles social workers can play in supporting women to acquire and use digital skills to facilitate safe CSA disclosure and child protection (Topsümer et al., 2023).

Research Questions

1. What is the level of digital skill awareness and competency among women in Enugu North Senatorial Zone?
2. What factors constrain women's ability to use digital skills to disclose CSA?
3. What are the perceived impacts of digital skills on CSA disclosure and help-seeking?
4. What roles can social workers play in supporting women to acquire and use digital skills to facilitate safe CSA disclosure?

Literature Review

Child sexual abuse, disclosure and help-seeking

Child sexual abuse (CSA) is widely recognised as a common and harmful experience with long-term consequences for physical, psychological, and social wellbeing across the life course. Population-based studies show substantial lifetime prevalence of CSA and sexual assault, with affected women at increased risk of depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, substance use, and sexual and reproductive health problems (Finkelhor et al., 2014). Research from Nigeria similarly documents high rates of CSA among adolescents, including in Enugu State, and highlights serious implications for health, schooling, and social development (Chime et al., 2021).

Disclosure of CSA is central to accessing medical care, psychosocial support, and legal protection. Systematic reviews indicate that many survivors delay disclosure for years or never disclose, often because of shame, fear of blame, concerns about not being believed, and mistrust of formal systems (Easton et al., 2019; Ullman, 2017). These barriers are amplified in patriarchal and highly stigmatising contexts, where sexual violence is silenced and institutional responses may be weak. Patterns of help-seeking often favour informal sources such as friends or family over professional services, with social workers and other practitioners frequently engaged late, if at all (Ullman, 2017). This underscores the importance of understanding how different communication channels and skills can support or hinder disclosure.

Digital skills, digital literacy and women's empowerment

Digital skills are increasingly recognised as essential for participating in contemporary social and economic life. They encompass the ability to use digital devices, applications, and networks to access, evaluate, and share information, as well as higher-order competences such as critical thinking, collaboration, and safe online behaviour (Adams, 2022; van Laar et al., 2019). International surveys show wide variation in digital skills across populations, with many adults lacking the competencies required to benefit fully from online resources and services (van Laar et al., 2019). Conceptual work on twenty-first-century competences highlights digital literacy as a multidimensional construct involving technical, information, communication, and problem-solving dimensions that education systems and training programmes must address (Van de Oudeweetering & Voogt, 2018).

For women, digital literacy has been linked to enhanced opportunities for education, income generation, civic participation, and access to health information. Community-based digital literacy programmes have been shown to support women's empowerment by increasing their confidence in using technology, expanding social networks, and improving their ability to engage with institutions (Sujarwo et al., 2022). At the same time, persistent gender and socio-economic digital divides mean that many women, particularly in low-resource settings, remain excluded from digital opportunities and are less able than younger family members to navigate online environments (Adams, 2022). These gaps have clear implications for women's capacity to protect children from online harms and to use digital tools for help-seeking.

Digital technologies, CSA and online support

Digital technologies now play a significant role in both the perpetration of CSA and the provision of support to survivors. On the one hand, children's increasing use of the internet and mobile phones exposes them to risks such as online grooming, sexual exploitation, and inadvertent exposure to sexual content. On the other hand, digital platforms - including online support groups, moderated forums, and helplines - offer new avenues for anonymous and geographically unrestricted disclosure and peer support (Gibson et al., 2019). Reviews of online support groups for CSA survivors suggest that these spaces can reduce isolation, facilitate sharing of experiences, and provide information about coping and available resources, though concerns remain about moderation quality and data protection (Gibson et al., 2019).

Evidence from Nigeria indicates that mobile phones and other digital communication tools can also be used to facilitate disclosure of childhood sexual abuse and connect women to

services. One study of women of childbearing age found that digital communication skills were positively associated with willingness to disclose CSA, and argued that digital platforms can reduce some barriers associated with face-to-face disclosure in high-stigma environments (Okeke et al., 2020). However, such benefits depend on women's ability to use digital tools effectively and safely, and on the availability of trustworthy online or blended services that respond appropriately when abuse is reported.

Social work, digital communication and CSA

Social work's commitment to rights, social justice, and person-in-environment perspectives positions the profession to engage with CSA both offline and online. Social workers are involved in prevention, identification, assessment, and intervention in CSA cases, often working at the interface of families, communities, legal systems, and health and education services (World Health Organization, 2020). The growing use of digital technologies in service delivery - such as tele-counselling, online case management, and digital advocacy - creates new opportunities and responsibilities for social work, including the need to develop digital competences and ethical guidelines for online practice (Topsümer et al., 2023).

Emerging research in Nigeria and other low- and middle-income countries suggests that digital communication can support social workers in outreach, information sharing, and case follow-up in contexts where physical access to services is constrained (Okeke et al., 2020). At the same time, limited digital infrastructure, low digital literacy among service users and practitioners, and concerns about confidentiality and data security pose challenges. There is particular interest in how social workers might leverage digital tools to facilitate safe disclosure of CSA and connect survivors to appropriate support, especially where stigma and fear inhibit in-person help-seeking (Easton et al., 2019; Okeke et al., 2020).

Research gap

Overall, the literature shows that CSA is prevalent and under-disclosed, that disclosure is shaped by complex socio-cultural and institutional factors, and that digital skills and technologies are increasingly relevant to both risk and protection (Finkelhor et al., 2014; Chime et al., 2021; Gibson et al., 2019). Studies have begun to document how digital communication can support CSA disclosure among women in Nigeria and elsewhere, and how digital literacy programmes can empower women more broadly (Okeke et al., 2020; Sujarwo et al., 2022). However, there is a paucity of research that explicitly examines the relationship between women's digital skills and CSA disclosure in specific low-resource contexts, and that considers the implications of this relationship for social work practice.

In particular, little is known about how women's digital competences affect their capacity to disclose CSA - both their own experiences and abuse involving children in their care - in southeastern Nigeria, where digital access, gender norms, and service provision may differ from other regions. There is also limited evidence on how social workers might support women to acquire and use digital skills as part of CSA prevention, detection, and response. This study addresses these gaps by exploring digital skills and CSA disclosure among women in Enugu North Senatorial Zone, and by analysing perceived barriers and the potential roles of social workers in leveraging digital tools to promote safe disclosure and child protection.

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory posits that human development and behaviour emerge from dynamic interactions across five nested environmental systems, rather than isolated individual traits. The microsystem encompasses immediate relationships and settings (family, peers, digital tools) where women directly engage in disclosure; the mesosystem captures interactions between these (home-online support linkages); the exosystem includes indirect influences (health services, digital infrastructure); the macrosystem reflects broader Nigerian cultural norms (patriarchy, stigma); and the chronosystem addresses temporal shifts such as rising smartphone penetration.

This study applies the theory by positioning digital skills as proximal processes - bi-directional interactions between women (person characteristics such as literacy) and their micro- and mesosystems (smartphone apps, WhatsApp groups) - that mediate CSA disclosure within Nigeria's stigmatising macrosystem. Low digital competency hinders microsystem-based help-seeking, while exosystem barriers (poor internet connectivity, limited-service access) amplify macrosystem stigma, helping to explain non-disclosure patterns among women in Enugu. The theory guides analysis of multi-level barriers and informs the study's objectives, which assess skill levels (microsystem), constraints (meso/exosystem), impacts (process outcomes), and social work roles (system-level interventions).

Social work's Person-in-Environment (PIE) perspective complements this framework (Germain, 1973; Germain & Gitterman, 1980), emphasising contextual skill-building for help-seeking and child protection. Together, these lenses analyse the role of digital skills in CSA disclosure and justify a multi-level social work response, ranging from individual training to advocacy for improved digital infrastructure and policy implementation.

Methodology

Study design and setting

This cross-sectional survey assessed the prevalence and correlates of digital skills and CSA disclosure among women at a single time point. Cross-sectional designs are appropriate for descriptive-correlational objectives in resource-constrained settings (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection was conducted in Enugu North Senatorial Zone, Enugu State, Nigeria, spanning urban and semi-urban communities with varying levels of digital infrastructure.

Participants and sampling

Participants comprised women aged 18 years and older residing in Enugu North Senatorial Zone who were capable of providing informed consent. A quota-based purposive sample of 200 participants was recruited from community markets ($n = 80$), churches, and women's groups ($n = 120$), ensuring diversity in socioeconomic status, education, and digital access. Quotas were used to balance representation by age (18–23 years: 25%; 24–29 years: 30%; 30+ years: 45%), education (secondary: 55%; tertiary: 45%), and monthly income ($<₦30,000$: 60%; $\geq₦30,000$: 40%), reflecting local Enugu North census profiles. From 235 women approached, 200 agreed to participate (response rate: 85%). An a priori power analysis using G*Power 3.1 (Faul et al., 2007) confirmed that the sample size was sufficient to detect correlations of at least 0.30 ($\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, two-tailed).

Data collection instrument and procedure

Data collection spanned February to May 2024 and employed a pre-tested, structured questionnaire with an overall Cronbach's α of 0.82. The instrument captured socio-demographic characteristics; a 10-item digital skills scale adapted from van Laar et al. (2019; $\alpha = 0.79$); CSA experience and disclosure; children's online exposure; and barriers to and facilitators of disclosure.

Four trained female research assistants conducted primary face-to-face interviews in English or Igbo ($n = 180$). A hybrid approach was used by supplementing this with self-administered online questionnaires via secure Google Forms links shared with digitally proficient participants ($n = 20$; i.e., those with tertiary education and smartphone access). This design allowed for nuanced exploration of digital disclosure experiences while accommodating varying levels of competence. A pilot test with 30 similar women refined wording and logistics; interview sessions lasted 20–30 minutes. Participation was voluntary and anonymous.

Data analysis

Data from both modes were merged into SPSS v.27 with double-entry verification (98% accuracy). Descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, and percentages) were used to profile participant characteristics and key variables. Pearson correlations were used to test associations between digital skills and disclosure, following confirmation of normality (Shapiro-Wilk tests) and linearity (scatterplots). Open-ended responses were analysed thematically, with inter-rater reliability at Cohen's $\kappa = 0.78$. Statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$, with the lead author overseeing all analyses and resolving discrepancies through team consensus.

Data Quality and Adequacy

Item completeness reached 95% (<5% missing data via listwise deletion). Scales demonstrated reliability (digital skills $\alpha=0.79$; disclosure $\alpha=0.85$). Content validity stemmed from established sources (van Laar et al., 2019) and piloting. Assumptions upheld robust inferences across collection modes.

Ethical Considerations

University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN) Social Work Research Ethics Committee approved the study (Ref: SW/REC/2024/001). Participants received verbal/written briefings on aims, voluntariness, withdrawal, and confidentiality. Informed consent preceded all modes. Distress minimization avoided abuse narratives; referrals provided. Online data used encrypted platforms with de-identification, accessible solely to the team.

Results

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 200)

Characteristic	n	%
Age (years)		
18–23	40	20.0
24–29	90	45.0
30+	70	35.0
<i>Mean (SD)</i>	27.4 (5.8)	-

Marital Status

Characteristic	n	%
Single	130	65.0
Married	60	30.0
Other (widowed/divorced)	10	5.0
Education		
Secondary school	104	52.0
Tertiary	86	43.0
No formal education	10	5.0
Occupation		
Students	80	40.0
Business owners/traders	50	25.0
Artisans	40	20.0
Civil servants	20	10.0
Farmers	10	5.0
Monthly Income (₦)		
<30,000	96	48.0
30,000–50,000	64	32.0
>50,000	40	20.0
Religion		

Characteristic	n	%
Christian	180	90.0
Other	20	10.0
Digital Device Ownership		
Smartphone	160	80.0
Basic phone only	30	15.0
None	10	5.0

Note: Quota sampling matched local census (85% response rate).

Table 1 presents the demographic profile of participants (N = 200). The age distribution was well represented across groups, with 20.0% (n = 40) aged 18–23 years, 45.0% (n = 90) aged 24–29 years, and 35.0% (n = 70) aged 30 years and older (mean age = 27.4, SD = 5.8). Regarding marital status, 65.0% (n = 130) were single, 30.0% (n = 60) married, and 5.0% (n = 10) reported other marital statuses (widowed/divorced). Educational attainment levels included 52.0% (n = 104) who had completed secondary education, 43.0% (n = 86) with tertiary qualifications, and 5.0% (n = 10) with no formal education.

Occupational categories were diverse: students represented the largest group (40.0%, n = 80), followed by business owners/traders (25.0%, n = 50), artisans (20.0%, n = 40), civil servants (10.0%, n = 20), and farmers (5.0%, n = 10). Monthly income levels reflected economic constraints, with 48.0% (n = 96) earning less than ₦30,000. A large majority (90.0%, n = 180) identified as Christian, mirroring the dominant religious composition of the study area.

Digital skills profile

Among 200 participants, basic digital skills - defined as the ability to make telephone calls, send SMS messages, or use WhatsApp for communication - predominated, reported by 75.0% (n = 150). In contrast, advanced digital skills - such as navigating email applications, conducting online searches, or accessing specialized support platforms - were reported by only 25.0% (n = 50).

Digital Skills Prevalence

Among the 200 participants, basic digital skills - such as making telephone calls, sending SMS messages, and using WhatsApp for communication - predominated, with 75.0% (n=150) reporting these abilities. In contrast, advanced skills, including navigating email applications, conducting online searches, and accessing specialized support platforms, were much less common, reported by only 25.0% (n=50) of women.

CSA Prevalence and Disclosure Patterns

Self-reported childhood CSA history was prevalent among 35.0% (n = 70) of participants. Of these women, only 40.0% (n = 28) had disclosed their experiences, and all disclosures were made exclusively to informal contacts rather than formal systems: friends accounted for 50.0% (n = 14), siblings for 30.0% (n = 8), and partners for 20.0% (n = 6). No participant reported disclosing to authorities, police, health services, or social work agencies. The non-disclosure rate among CSA survivors was 60.0% (n = 42).

Thematic analysis of their open-ended responses ($\kappa = 0.78$) identified three primary barriers that emerged consistently:

- **Fear of stigma** (54.8%, n = 23), illustrated by one participant: “People will call me bad girl, spoil my name in the community forever” (P23, 32 years old).
- **Apprehension about blame** (40.5%, n = 17), as expressed by another: “They will say I caused it myself by my bad behavior when I was young” (P67, 28 years old).
- **Concerns about family conflict** (31.0%, n = 13), reflected in the statement: “My people will fight each other, scatter our home completely” (P15, 41 years old).

Participants frequently endorsed multiple barriers simultaneously, explaining why percentages totalled more than 100%. Across the full sample of 200 women, 45.0% (n = 90) expressed reluctance to report suspected child CSA, primarily citing fear of retaliation from perpetrators or families (60.0%, n = 54) and anticipated disbelief from authorities or community members (50.0%, n = 45).

Children's Online Exposure

A substantial 68.0% (n = 136) of participants reported having observed community children being unintentionally exposed to sexual content through parents' internet-enabled devices in homes or public settings. Despite 72.0% (n = 144) recognising women's close physical proximity to children as beneficial for early detection of abuse signs, 65.0% (n = 130) acknowledged lacking adequate digital skills to monitor children's online activities or use digital reporting channels effectively.

Association between digital skills and disclosure

Among the subgroup of women with documented CSA history (n = 70), Pearson correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive association between levels of digital skills and disclosure behaviour (r = 0.35, p < .01). All statistical assumptions were rigorously confirmed prior to analysis, including normality (Shapiro-Wilk test) and linearity (scatterplots), ensuring the validity and reliability of this finding.

Perceived benefits and barriers of digital skills

Participants identified several perceived benefits of digital skills, including:

- Facilitated access to CSA-related information and services (80.0%, n = 160).
- Opportunity for anonymous disclosure through hotlines, mobile apps, or social media platforms (70.0%, n = 140).
- Connection to valuable online peer support networks (65.0%, n = 130).
- Engagement in digital advocacy efforts (55.0%, n = 110).

Reported barriers were multifaceted and included:

- Significant digital literacy deficits, particularly among older women and those with low incomes (75.0%, n = 150), as one participant explained: “These phone things confuse me too much, I don’t know where to even start” (P42, 52 years old).
- Privacy and harassment concerns in online environments (60.0%, n = 120), illustrated by: “Phone is not safe at all, anybody can see my secrets and judge me” (P89, 35 years old).
- Perceived risk of re-traumatisation through digital interactions (50.0%, n = 100).

Thematic patterns and ecological mapping

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses among the 42 non-disclosing CSA survivors (κ = 0.78) yielded three dominant barriers, summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Thematic Barriers among Non-Disclosing CSA Survivors (n = 42)

Theme	n	%
Stigma fears	23	54.8
Family conflict	13	31.0
Blame fears	17	40.5

Note: Derived from thematic analysis of open-ended responses among CSA survivors who did not disclose (n=42). Inter-rater reliability: Cohen's κ=0.78. Percentages exceed 100% due to multiple barriers endorsed per participant.

These patterns were further mapped onto Bronfenbrenner's ecological levels (Table 3), providing the empirical grounding for multilevel interpretation.

Table 3. Participant Data Mapped to Ecological Patterns

Ecological Level	Data Source	Key Finding	Observed Pattern
Microsystem	n=28 disclosure attempts	75% basic skills	Limited proximal digital help-seeking
Mesosystem	n=13 family fear quotes	31% conflict fears	Home ↔ external service disconnects
Macrosystem	n=23 stigma narratives	55% cite stigma fears	Cultural silencing of disclosure

Note: Derived from thematic analysis (Cohen's $\kappa=0.78$) linking raw participant responses to ecological patterns. Data sources reflect specific coding categories from n=42 non-disclosure narratives.

Table 3 showed that at the microsystem level, 75% of women who attempted disclosure possessed only basic digital skills, limiting their capacity to use helplines, moderated forums, or anonymous reporting apps. At the mesosystem level, family conflict fears (31%, n = 13) blocked trusted home networks from linking to formal services. At the macrosystem level, stigma fears (55%, n = 23) illustrated how patriarchal norms and collectivist values prioritising family reputation systematically silenced disclosure across ecological levels.

Participant-endorsed social work roles

Women strongly endorsed social work-led interventions, including:

- CSA awareness campaigns designed to counter pervasive stigma (85.0%, n = 170), as one participant stated: "Come to church programs, tell women how to talk openly about this CSA matter without shame" (P112, 29 years old).
- Caregiver-focused digital literacy training programs (80.0%, n = 160).
- Safe digital monitoring and reporting workshops (75.0%, n = 150), with one woman noting: "Social workers should teach us how to use phone to report bad people secretly without anyone knowing" (P78, 37 years old).
- Provision of confidential online or telephone counselling services (70.0%, n = 140).
- Implementation of trauma-informed public education campaigns (65.0%, n = 130).

Discussion

This cross-sectional investigation among 200 women in Enugu North Senatorial Zone, Enugu State, Nigeria, yields critical insights into the interplay between digital skills, personal histories of child sexual abuse (CSA), and disclosure behaviours. The statistically significant positive correlation between digital skills and disclosure likelihood ($r = 0.35$, $p < .01$ among the 35% with CSA histories, $n = 70$) represents the study's central empirical contribution. Despite this association, disclosure rates remained strikingly low at 40% ($n = 28$), confined exclusively to informal channels - friends (50%, $n = 14$) and siblings (30%, $n = 8$) - with zero formal reporting to authorities or service providers. Basic digital competencies dominated the sample (75%, $n = 150$), limited to calls, SMS, and WhatsApp, while advanced abilities essential for accessing support platforms remained rare (25%, $n = 50$). These findings systematically address all four research objectives and are interpreted through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory, complemented by social work's Person-in-Environment perspective (Germain & Gitterman, 1980).

Multilevel disclosure barriers across ecological systems

The ecological patterns documented in Table 3 provide a robust empirical foundation for multilevel analysis. At the **microsystem** level, the finding that 75% of disclosure attempters possessed only basic skills ($n = 28$) reveals proximal process failures in Bronfenbrenner's conceptualisation. Women successfully contacted informal ties through telephone calls but lacked the digital competence to navigate helplines, moderated forums, or anonymous reporting apps - precisely the platforms that could circumvent stigma barriers. This microsystem constraint directly explains the complete absence of formal service engagement despite demonstrated help-seeking intent.

At the **mesosystem** level, disconnection manifests in family conflict fears cited by 31% of non-disclosers ($n = 13$), blocking trusted home networks from linking to external support systems. The lack of formal service connections, despite robust informal networks and high maternal vigilance (72% of women recognised their proximity as beneficial for early detection), underscores critical linkage failures between microsystems. At the **macrosystem** level, stigma emerges as the dominant barrier, affecting 55% of non-disclosers ($n = 23$). Participant narratives such as "People will call me bad girl forever" (P23) and "They will say I caused it myself" (P67) illustrate how entrenched patriarchal norms and collectivist values that prioritise family reputation systematically silence disclosure across all ecological levels.

Digital skills as a measurable disclosure predictor

The moderate yet statistically significant correlation ($r = 0.35$) establishes digital proficiency as a concrete predictor of disclosure propensity within Nigeria's high-stigma context. Women with advanced skills not only demonstrated higher disclosure rates but also perceived enhanced access to anonymity-preserving platforms (70% endorsement, $n = 140$), including hotlines, mobile applications, and moderated social media groups. This quantitative finding extends Okeke et al.'s (2020) qualitative documentation of digital tools' help-seeking potential among Nigerian women, providing the empirical precision that prior descriptive accounts lacked. Critically, these results challenge prevailing digital-divide narratives that overemphasise infrastructure and hardware access (van Laar et al., 2019), instead demonstrating that trainable digital competencies constitute a pragmatic, scalable intervention target, particularly in light of the 80% smartphone penetration documented in this economically diverse sample.

Theoretical and empirical contributions

Bronfenbrenner's framework proves theoretically apposite, as the study's multilevel barriers - individual skill deficits, family dynamics, service gaps, institutional constraints, and cultural stigma - precisely mirror the nested system structure. This comprehensive approach surpasses single-level analyses by illuminating dynamic interactions across ecological domains. The Person-in-Environment perspective further deepens interpretation by framing digital skills not as isolated technical abilities but as transactionally constituted through person-context interactions. The 65% self-reported digital skills deficits for online monitoring alongside 68% observed child online exposure risks exemplify how individual competencies mediate environmental protection capacities.

Social work practice implications spanning ecological levels

Participant-endorsed intervention priorities operationalise theory through contextually grounded practice recommendations. At the **microsystem** level, caregiver digital literacy training (80% support, $n = 160$) directly counters the 75% prevalence of basic skills, equipping women to navigate beyond WhatsApp toward safety-oriented platforms. At the **macrosystem** level, stigma-reduction campaigns through church-based awareness programs (85% endorsement, $n = 170$) leverage the 90% Christian majority and their communal networks to dismantle cultural silencing. At the **meso-/exosystem** level, confidential telephone counselling (70%, $n = 140$) and safe digital reporting workshops (75%, $n = 150$) bridge critical service gaps while addressing privacy fears (60%, $n = 120$). These

recommendations harness existing strengths - diverse occupational profiles and high smartphone ownership - while systematically targeting empirically verified constraints.

Implications for Social Work Practice and Policy

Social workers should operationalise the participant-endorsed priorities (80–85% support) through community-based digital literacy programmes for women caregivers, trauma-informed stigma-reduction campaigns, and confidential tele-counselling platforms. These interventions directly address the identified 65% digital skills deficit for online monitoring and the 55% stigma barrier to disclosure.

Policy development must strengthen online and mobile CSA reporting services with enhanced anonymity, privacy protections, and safety features, and integrate these digital tools into existing child protection frameworks. Social workers also require specialised training in delivering digital skills instruction, providing online counselling, and conducting survivor-centred advocacy to effectively bridge exosystem infrastructure gaps.

Government investment should prioritise infrastructure development in low-resource settings alongside comprehensive violence-against-women and-children's policies that explicitly address technology-facilitated abuse. This multilevel approach aligns with ecological systems theory by simultaneously targeting individual competencies, community stigma, and structural service deficits revealed through the study findings. The research advances Gibson et al.'s (2019) online intervention model by demonstrating its applicability within low-resource African contexts where infrastructure lags but human capital remains interventionally responsive.

Conclusion

This study establishes that digital skills enhance child sexual abuse (CSA) disclosure among women in Enugu North Senatorial Zone, despite the predominance of basic competencies and persistent barriers of stigma and literacy deficits. These findings directly address the study's objective to examine the relationship between digital competencies and CSA disclosure practices, demonstrating that even modest differences in digital proficiency correlate with higher disclosure propensity and perceived help-seeking capacity.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and social work's Person-in-Environment perspective provide a robust conceptual framework for multilevel interventions targeting these challenges, thereby fulfilling the objective to theorise contextually relevant solutions. The empirical patterns - ranging from microsystem skill deficits to macrosystem cultural

stigma - show how individual digital abilities are embedded within and constrained by nested environmental forces, underscoring the necessity of integrated, system-wide responses.

Participant endorsements prioritise social work-led initiatives, including community-based digital literacy training for women caregivers, CSA awareness campaigns that counter pervasive stigma, and the provision of confidential online and telephone counselling services. These findings underscore social work's essential role in facilitating technology-enabled disclosure pathways, reducing stigma, and strengthening comprehensive child protection within Nigeria's rapidly evolving digital landscape. The study therefore offers empirically grounded, theory-informed implications for both national practice and global policy on technology-mediated responses to CSA.

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