



Identity Expression—the Case of ‘Sakawa’ Boys in Ghana

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Received: 15 March 2021 / Revised: 27 April 2021 / Accepted: 30 April 2021
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Abstract

Internet fraud remains a problem in Ghana and thus attracts the attention of teachers, researchers, civil society organisations, the state and policymakers. Existing studies on Internet fraud focused on the reasons, combat strategies, cyber spiritualism, the impact of Internet fraud on individuals and the country, and the inadequate legal frameworks for handling such cybercrimes. Despite efforts by the government and other interest groups in fighting the menace, the phenomenon continues to increase among youth in Ghana. Applying Paul Willis’ theory of ethnographic imagination, this study examined how Internet scammers—*Sakawa* boys—in the northern region of Ghana use their bodies and other cultural materials to express their identity and make meaning. The study reveals that *Sakawa* boys express their identities and make meaning using language—slang and jargon; conspicuous consumption of material goods; ostentatious lifestyle; techno-religiosity; and gender cyber-fraud collaboration. Thus, it offers a basal understanding of emic dimension of relationship between children and youth in cybercrime, unsuspected victims, and preventive measures. The study also gives theoretical contributions to research in understanding the broader socio-cultural milieu of children and youth in crimes and possible practical measures towards containment.

Keywords Covert antisocial behaviour · Cybercrime · Ethnographic imagination · Identity · Ghana; *Sakawa* boys

Introduction

This paper investigates how *Sakawa* boys express their identity and make meaning using their bodies in the northern region of Ghana. The phenomenon of *Sakawa* or cybercrime has attracted a dazzling array of studies evidenced by the accumulated body of literature on the subject. A critical review of the extant body of literature reveals a plethora of reasons for

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the surge of cybercrime in Ghana. The evidence ranges from unemployment and poverty. These reasons compel a majority of the people, especially the youth, to resort to cyber fraud as an alternative source of livelihood (Armstrong, 2011; Atiso & Kammer, 2019; Cassiman, 2019; Cassiman, 2018; Halawayhi, 2014; Mohammed, Yusuf & Saidi, 2019; Morton, 2011; Oduro-Frimpong, 2011; Warner, 2011; Wrigley-Asante et al., 2019; Yeboah-Boateng, 2015). Another reason for cybercrime has to do with the export of electronic waste into Ghana, which serves as data sources for cybercrime (Abugri, 2011; Baylon & Antwi-Boasiako, 2016; Doyon-Martin, 2015; Grant & Oteng-Ababio, 2019; Whitty, 2018). Other contributors include the lack of adequate legal framework and technical know-how to combat cybercrime (Adu & Adjei, 2018; Apau et al., 2019; Barfi et al., 2018; Boateng et al., 2010, 2011; Ennin & Mensah, 2019; Ofori- Dua et al., 2019), slave trade, colonialism and systematic or structural inequalities in the country. The Sakawa boys justify Internet scamming by considering the way it can act as both a form of reparation as well as a retaliation against the imperial West for its economic exploitation of Africa in the past. According to various studies, this is reflected in the problems the western world suffers today, including their legacy of corrupt politicians who institutionalise structural and systematic inequalities that seek to benefit others while impoverishing the larger majority of Ghanaian people (Armstrong, 2011; Baylon & Antwi-Boasiako, 2016; Cassiman, 2018, 2019; Duah & Kwabena, 2015; Morton, 2011; Warner, 2011). The few attempts to examine the topic ethnographically are limited to the scopes of cyber spiritualism, romance scams or online dating, and the typology of methods used by cyber fraudsters and others (Baylon & Antwi-Boasiako, 2016; Cassiman, 2019; Cassiman, 2018; Danquah & Longe, 2011; Warner, 2011).

The state, NGOs, and civil society organisations make considerable efforts to curb the menace of Sakawa. However, attempts to conceptually, theoretically, and methodologically analyse the phenomenon as a cultural entity are lacking- a very costly oversight which may gravely affect the fight against the Sakawa. Considering that crime has no ontological reality (Hillyard & Tombs, 2004, p. 11), ethnographic theories of crime typically explore the emic perspectives of relationships of the trio of crime, victimisation, and control, to offer a basal understanding of the broader socio-cultural milieu of crimes and possible containment measures (Fleetwood & Potter, 2017). The current study uses a qualitative approach to address this empirical shortfall by adopting Willis (2000) ethnographic imaginative or socio-symbolic analysis and homology to examine how Sakawa boys use their bodies and other material forms of culture to express their identity in Ghana. Such an assiduous attempt may be a useful pathway to understanding the intricacies of Sakawa as a culture, which may offer innovative ideas in understanding the situation of Sakawa boys in Ghana. It may also be a useful guide in future attempts to study other aspects of crime in general.

Cybercrime in Ghana

In the article '*Beyond E-Mail Headers—An Ethnography-Based Model for Counteracting Socially Engineered Cyber Deception*', Danquah et al. (2013) presented an ethnographic study of cybercrime in Ghana with pictorial evidence of online tools and software used by youth in committing crimes. These youth socially engineered victims using VPN tunnel connections via AnchorFree software to rob victims of their valuables. Since perpetrators come from unknown destinations and operate with fictitious identities, their arrest and prosecution is often a wild goose chase.

The consistency in findings with other works over the years (e.g., Danquah & Longe, 2011; Warner, 2011) called for a robust theoretical approach in counteracting the socially engineered deception and theft approach in the study of cyber-related crimes). While the conclusion in Danquah et al. (2013) is useful in the collective fight against cybercrime in Ghana, they do not capture how youth use their bodies and other forms of material culture to express their identities. This is a serious shortcoming of the research. The present study addresses this shortcoming by examining how Sakawa boys use their bodies to express their identities in the northern region of Ghana. Furthermore, Danquah and Longe's (2011) ethnographic report concludes that 'the typical Ghanaian cyber-criminal is hardly ever involved in spoofing, page-jacking and auction/merchandize frauds...[but] the use of social engineering skills in a syndicate form tends to be a prominent feature in cyber deception and theft' (Danquah & Longe, 2011, p. 169).

Also, strategies used in cybercrimes are crucial in the study of youth in cybercrimes. Youth in cybercrimes use various strategies, including identity theft/impersonation, online dating or romance scams, fake gold or estates deals, running fake NGOs, and black magic (use of supernatural powers) to commit cybercrimes (Baylon & Antwi-Boasiako, 2016; Warner, 2011). This finding—methods of deception—will guide people from becoming potential victims of cyberfraud. Nevertheless, Danquah and Longe (2011) bemoaned the inadequate legal framework and technical know-how that threaten the effective prosecution of cyberspace infractions in the country. For instance, the Electronic Transactions Act (Act 772), which aims at ensuring that cybercrime-related offences are investigated and prosecuted, is fraught with legal deficiencies in addressing crimes related to cyberspace. The Criminal Code, Act 29/60 Sect. 131 of the Constitution on pretence, is usually invoked in addressing cybercrime-related cases (Boateng et al., 2010; 2011). The inability to interpret cyber-related crimes under this current provision renders the punishment ineffective and not deterrent enough to forestall the recurrence of cybercrimes. Perpetrators (with the help of their lawyers) tend to exploit the shortfalls in law to commit cybercrimes with impunity. Consequently, Danquah and Longe (2011) proposed pragmatic law reforms on cybercrimes with punitive sanctions to ensure strict compliance of normative standards regarding cyberspace in the country, equipping law enforcement agencies with modern systems of technology to undertake complex cyber-related crimes as well as sensitising the general public on the activities on cybercriminals.

The geography-related crimes are often overlooked in the literature, so Danquah and Longe (2011) inclusion of this aspect would be very useful for future research. While Danquah and Longe's (2011) meticulous analysis of various strategic deployment of methods to victimise people and the recommendation professed is invaluable in the fight against cybercrime in Ghana, the omission of how youth in cybercrimes use their bodies to express their identity warrants significant attention. This study seeks to address that element. Whether this omission was intentionally made or it was a mere oversight is unclear to us. Regardless, it questions the objective of the emic perspective reportage of cyber deception and theft in Ghana, which may misinform its audience. Nevertheless, Danquah and Longe (2011) is part of the ongoing debate on cybercrime in Ghana and the attempts to combat the problem.

Techno-religiosity and Rituals in Cybercrime/Sakawa

John Mbiti's (1990) famous assertion that Africans are notoriously religious to explain the ubiquitous integration of religious rituals in every aspect of life in Africa is proven in the Sakawa phenomenon. Research on techno-religiosity in Sakawa culture in many African countries, including Ghana conclude that they apply religion/spiritualism in committing

cybercrimes. Tade (2013, p. 690) calls it ‘cyber spiritualism’; the use of mystical or magical powers (a belief component in the African Traditional Religion) to be able to succeed in scam business (Whitty, 2018; Oduro-Frimpong, 2014; Abubakar, 2012; Armstrong, 2011; Danquah & Longe, 2011; Warner, 2011; Morton, 2011). Although not verifiable scientifically, Whitty (2018) concludes that these rituals are essentially meant to hypnotise victims to part with their valuables. In the words of Tade (2013), victims are hypnotised and give out their possessions, including money and other valuables to the scammers without any hesitation.

It is important to note that the role of religious specialists including Mallams or Pastors and other traditional priests and priestesses should not be taken lightly; they form an integral part of the religiosity in the cyberworld. They provide scammers with necessary magical materials, like magic rings, charms and amulets, handkerchiefs, magical powder, and other forms of sacrifices (including human) and cannibalism (Armstrong, 2011; Warner, 2011). The process and application of these rituals, like other religious practices, involve some form of rules and prohibitions which must be followed strictly by the individual, lest they face the dire consequences of any ritual mistakes (Armstrong, 2011; Baylon & Antwi-Boasiako, 2016; Oduro-Frimpong, 2014).

Gender Fraud Through Online Dating and Relationship

While Warner claimed that about 90% of Internet scammers in Ghana are made up of men (2011, p.740), it is difficult to obtain an accurate data of young women in Internet scamming in the country, partly because of the moral standards society sets for women, in terms of virtue and proper character for prospective brides. Cassiman’s (2019) research revealed interesting findings on how gender is implicated in Internet scams in the Zongo communities, as young girls and women participate in Internet scams through online dating (Cassiman, 2018, 2019). Generally, the type of gender fraud that prevails in the cybercrime business in Ghana is online dating or friendship scam. Cassiman argued that online dating or friendship is one of the surest ways of making ‘quick and easy money’ (Cassiman, 2019, p.13) amongst Internet fraudsters in the Zongo communities in Accra.

Online dating and romance scams in the cyberworld are ‘man-woman format’ or ‘gender role’ (Cassiman, 2019, p. 5) and ‘gender-swapping’ (Burrell, 2012). It involves ‘male switching’ scammers misrepresenting as females online through fictitious profiles and accounts that bear erotic images of women, mostly models, to lure men (especially Westerners) into relationships for the scammers’ monetary gains. Success in this requires establishing ‘genuine’ contacts through the deployment of mastery and tactics in the art of scam. Otherwise, a potential victim may slip by when the scheme is detected. To successfully become a cyber fraudster in the Sakawa industry requires mastery of artistic conning skills (Cassiman, 2018).

Scammers recruit female accomplices to take over in front of webcams and answer phone calls when it requires face-to-face contact with targets (Cassiman, 2019; Warner, 2011). It must be noted that employing the services of females, as Cassiman (2019) revealed, entails utmost trust and confidentiality, as every secret and detail of the grand plot, including previous interactions with the victims, should be shared. There are instances where mistrust or unfair treatment in sharing proceeds results in resounding failures in subsequent scams. In some cases, accomplices may retreat to establish genuine contacts with victims (Cassiman, 2019, p.10). Consequently, the male scammer in this dyadic union

must also ensure openness and transparency towards the female accomplice, who strives to maintain her ambivalent role in sustaining the fictitious relationship with victims while keeping the trust of the game boy Cassiman, 2019, p. 8). Where girls or women participate in this scheme is both intriguing and at the same time worth further reflection. For one thing, it challenges the age-old stereotype that men are smart, cunning, and tricky. For another thing, the female browser or scammer who appears witty in cyberspace is not only transgressing gender norms but also falls short as a complete virtuous woman for marriage (Cassiman, 2019). Being cunning and skilful in fraud poses challenges in finding suitable suitors; '[t]rickery skills seem to condemn young women to the status of [young girls or ladies who participate in scams] and are believed to affect the femininity, piety, and decency of aspiring brides and wives' (Cassiman, 2019, p. 496 [emphasis added]).

Therefore, female scammers with names such as Hawa, Salma, Ni'mah and Zainab in orthodox Muslim *Zongo* communities as revealed in Cassiman study in Nima and Accra, transgress the moral standard of womanhood and may find it difficult in settling down in marriage (Cassiman, 2019, p. 494). Cassiman's (2018, 2019) conclusions are worth noting. Her studies confirm that the readiness of Sakawa boys to cede their roles in online dating scams to girls to ingeniously execute a grand scheme in cybercrime challenges gender relations and norms. They also affirm the assertion that gender as a socially constructed practice is not fixed, but fluid, subject to the wind of change of society. *Zongo* communities in Accra, Ghana are no exemption (Cassiman, 2018, p. 2019).

Conspicuous Consumption of Luxury Goods and Services

Thorstein Veblen (1984) coined the term 'conspicuous consumption' or 'demonstrative consumption' in 1899 to express the idea of consumption of goods and services that utterly transgressed from the fundamental assumption which underpins consumer behaviour in the commodity market. The consumption is motive-driven, used to show off wealth.

According to Veblen, conspicuous consumption is 'the utility of consumption as evidence of wealth.... consumption as a means of reputability' (Vasilyev et al., 2017 p. 400). In Veblen's sense, individuals or groups feel gratified when goods and services are indicative of riches, possessions, and mechanism of maintaining prestige and status in society (Vasilyev et al., 2017, p. 402; Veblen, 1984, p.108). Consumption of goods and services as a significant social practice is increasingly creating a significant social rift in modern times. Social disparities, which hitherto were invisible in traditional societies, have become a symbolic feature of modern societies.

Consumption in modern times 'is not seen as 'simple satisfaction of needs', but rather a multivariate space of choice, expression, and presentation of oneself, construction of social strata, groups and identities.....a key characteristic of the lifestyles of the existing classes in society' (Vasilyev et al., 2017, p. 399).

The behaviour of every consumer is need-driven: status-seeking, prestige and the need for uniqueness largely manifest in the 'bandwagon luxury consumption' (Shaikh, 2019, p. 33) of individual consumers in modern societies. Tian et al. (2001) see consumer need for uniqueness as 'the trait of pursuing differentness relative to others through the acquisition, utilization, and disposition of consumer goods to develop and enhance one's self-image and social image' (Tian et al., 2001, p. 52). Consequently, individual social cliques strive to protect individuality and uniqueness. But at the same time, seek to achieve self-expression and identity through ostentatious lifestyles and the conspicuous consumption of luxury goods and services (Kauppinen-Räsänen et al., 2018, p.77–79; Shaikh, 2019, p.33).

Gary Becker (1994), arguing from the economic perspective, bemoaned the changing fate and trends of human relations in the face of rational consumption of goods and services. According to Becker, modern societies have come to exemplify a system of production in which conspicuous consumption of goods and services replaces and devalues relationships. This phenomenon has greatly affected traditional values and family systems including 'communication and lifestyle: fast food instead of home-cooked meals, meetings in restaurants instead of visiting someone's place, etc.' (Vasilyev et al., 2017, p. 404).

On the other hand, Belk (1984) offers a deeper analysis of the relationships between identities and material possessions. Belk argues unapologetically that people's possessions largely form, express and reflect their identities, especially in modern societies. By attributing such symbolic meaning and interpretation to material possessions, we encourage a materialistic culture that becomes the standard of asserting and attaining the gratified ideal self. In this sense, Belk conceptualised materialism as interpretative of group behaviour and identity.

Sadly, he was not vocal enough about how riches and possessions are acquired. This raises concerns about the questionable sources of wealth for a vast array of people. One of the many sins of the Ghanaian public is the obsessed mentality of celebrating the riches and prosperity of individuals, with less attention on how people come about their wealth. This type of wealth is not different from the riches gained by Sakawa boys in the northern region and many other regions of Ghana. Nevertheless, Belk's work is an empirical extension of how material possessions are expressed indicators of identities of social cliques, which factors into the current study.

Language and Identity of the In-group

Language as a means of communication helps people to make sense of their world (Spender, 1980). It is how culture and identity are preserved (Davis, 1999). Primarily, language as a human attribute is both geographically and socio-situationally context-specific, and how it operates varies indiscriminately (Hernández-Campoy, 2016). The literature is replete with examples of the specificity of technical terms and vocabulary-register, jargon, and slang which are associated with professionals and non-professionals for distinctiveness and professionalism, confidentiality, and belongingness, among others. The term register refers to the lexical variance in languages concerning subject matter or topics of disciplines, fields, or professions, including banking and finance, medicine, engineering, musicology, and journalism. In short, a register is what makes up the professional language within a field of study or practice. According to Hudson 'your dialect shows who (or what) you *are*, whilst your register shows what you are *doing*' (Hernández-Campoy, 2016, p. 42; Hudson, 1980; 1996, p. 46).

Linguistically, both jargon and slang emerged out of the need for uniqueness; they are devices for establishing psychological distinctiveness between social groups (Drake, 1980, p. 65). They are the informal language that serves as an instrument of solidarity and confidentiality. Both are the linguistic equivalents of ethnic, racial, and other minority languages that aim at safeguarding the interest and privileges of social groups (Amalia, 2019; Drake, 1980, p. 66). Though not clearly defined, and sometimes overlapping conceptually, jargon serves the interests of professional groups, whilst slang is age-specific and preserves ordinary social cliques.

Historically, slang (like *Cant and Argot*) was associated with gangs of criminals, thieves, and vagabonds (Amalia, 2019; Andersson & Trudgill, 1990). Concurrently, Sledd (1965) believed it 'flourishes in the semantic areas of sex, drinking, narcotics, racing, athletics, popular music, and other crimes' (Sledd, 1965, p. 699). In modern times, it has democratically become a language of all those who want to feel unique and distinct from others. Characteristically, slang enhances the uniqueness and distinctiveness of a social group; it rejects conventions and norms that pertain to formal spoken language. Slang as informal language is 'used deliberately to flout a conventional social or semantic norm' (Dumas & Lighter, 1978, p.12; see also Eble, 2004, p. 264).

In this study, the concepts of jargon and slang will be applied as a sublanguage of Sakawa culture, and substantiate how this type of language is a way of expressing Sakawa identity in safeguarding their membership, interest, and confidentiality as a subculture.

Theoretical Perspectives

This study will apply Paul Willis' theory of ethnographic imagination to cast light on the behaviour and how Sakawa boys express their identity and meaning-making in the northern region of Ghana. Paul Willis, a sociologist and ethnographer, draws experiences from his background and argues that ethnographic practices and imagination are essentially conceptual, theoretical, and analytical tools in understanding the aesthetic and irreducibility of behaviour and practices of people. Willis developed the theory of Ethnographic Imagination or socio-symbolic analysis of culture to examine human meaning-making in society. In this approach, Willis emphasised how people make sense with each other and with themselves to create and develop a sense of identity, which is distinct from the mainstream culture. He believes that the only way to do this is through ethnography. Unlike other approaches that look more at language and other abstract signifying systems that can be studied from afar, ethnography allows you to use the human body as your research instrument, where one identifies oneself with those human elements to understand how meaning is developed. At the heart of this approach lies materiality, sensuousness, relationships between human groups and their preferred cultural items (Willis, 2000, 2014); how human bodies are practically and sensuously involved in objects or artefacts that surround them.

According to Willis, there are three ways in which humans create identity: the indexical level, homological level, and the integral level (Willis, 2014, p. 248). The indexical level simply refers to the quality of involvement of human beings with the things surrounding them. The degree of relationships between social groups and their preferred cultural items. Thus, 'the indexical concerns the degree to which external items are related to a social group in a general quantitative sense, i.e., for how long a group listens to pop music, where and how often' (*ibid*, p. 248). How often do they watch television, listen to music, and go to nightclubs, discotheques, or other entertainment venues? In other words, what is their artistic character, behaviour, or worldview? The homological level explains how the chosen cultural items reflect and hold certain human meanings that help to develop the identity of the humanised issues involved.

According to Willis, the indexical level concerns what people do, whereas the homological level tries to show the quality of the sensuousness related to what people choose to do than how one must 'consume' certain kinds of music, clothing, cars, and food. Further, he argues that careful observation of the relationships between human social groups and their preferred cultural items shows that this is not random. It is a chosen element. What is it

about particular objects, music, dances, foods, clothes or practices that attracts these kinds of human beings? Why these and not that? (Willis, 2014, p. 249–263). Finally, the integral level of analysis of the socio-symbolic approach to cultural forms focuses on the dialectical relation of the human group to a cultural item over time. That is, how this relation gets closer; how this identity changes through processes of human activity on these objects or when the cultural items themselves change (Willis, 2014, p. 263–265).

Relevant also to this study is the cultural dynamic framework, which supports the inevitable changes that characterise culture, as individuals strive to adapt to ever-changing conditions of society. This theory, which is akin to ethnographic imagination, further assumes that culture is created due to the daily interaction between individual actors. This implies that the interaction between people or group of individuals could influence the creation and rebranding of cultures and meaning-making within social groups (Ibrahim et al., 2019; Abdulai et al., 2019). This cultural dynamic framework is relevant to the study because it would help in conceptualising and analysing the interaction between Sakawa boys within these two locations as they create, recreate as well as make meaning of their everyday life. It is also important to point out that Sakawa culture in Ghana may not be homogenous due to differences in place and individual actors. Thus contextual differences might result in differences in behaviours among the Sakawa boys in the two research settings. Thus, the reason the cultural dynamism theory is of relevance to the study. There would be no surprise to discover later, differences in behavioural patterns between Sakawa boys in Tamale and their counterparts in the Yendi municipality.

In all, this study is situated within the ethnographic imagination/socio-symbolic analysis of cultural items to understand and interpret how youth in cybercrimes came into a homological relationship with various cultural items including motorbikes, cars, music and dance, fashion among other things. The purpose is to unearth how materiality or commodity fetishism and sensuousness are implicated in the creation of meaning and a sense of identity in these Sakawa boys.

Methodology

Access, Participants, and Site

We identified 15 experienced Sakawa boys in two different sites in the northern region of Ghana—Tamale and Yendi, through a gatekeeper, or ‘fada’. Fada, as known in the Sakawa fraternity in the northern region, is an individual knowledgeable in the game who can share the ideas and experience of the Sakawa business with others, especially beginners. We relied on the expertise of two *fadas*—gatekeepers and key informants, which commensurate with the objective of qualitative research (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 145). We purposively identified 15 participants and 2 cities in the northern region. Thus, we selected 9 and 6 participants from Tamale and Yendi, respectively. These two cities—Tamale and Yendi—were considered key research sites because, among the cities of the region, cybercrime is pervasive in these cities. Nevertheless, participants could opt out of the study and none of them was interviewed covertly. The study was carried out over 12 months in 2018. The findings emerged from an ethnographic approach with varied data sources including non-participant observation, unstructured interviews, and material and non-material cultural items including artefacts, cars, motorbikes, clothes, music, and food. This approach is appropriate in this study, as it resonates with Fleetwood and Potter (2017) that ‘[e]thnography is uniquely

able to get under the skin of the phenomenological draws of crime and control and the corporeal realities of victimization' (p.1).

Criteria for Including and Excluding Informants

We also applied certain criteria to determine whether a particular participant was relevant for the study and ought to be included or excluded from it. The criteria of characteristics that led to the inclusion of informants on one hand included the age, willingness, time and phenomenological experience of involving in Sakawa activities. Thus, participants were informed not to participate in the study if they were less than 17 and above 25 years of age. Secondly, participants in the study needed to have sufficient time; have not less than a year's experience in Sakawa activities, and willing to participate in the study. On the other hand, all Sakawa boys who did not meet the above criteria were excluded from the study. For instance, we excluded all Sakawa boys who fulfilled most of the criteria but did not meet the age requirement from the study.

Interviews

To achieve the aim of the research, and as stated earlier, we purposively selected 15 experienced Sakawa boys, aged 17 to 25, for in-depth semi-structured interviews, and three informal focus group discussions at three gathering spots of the interviewees. Thus, participants decided the times and venues for the interviews. On many occasions, the venues were secluded rented apartments or rooms in which the interviewees resided, and the time was mostly during the day. Only a few participants agreed to meet with us at night. The interviews centred around behavioural patterns and norms including ostentatious lifestyle, parlance, aesthetic consciousness, social life, subjectivities, idiosyncrasies, and other related lifestyles that express the fundamental idea of their identity. The data obtained was held confidentially, and analysis and discussion were accomplished through thorough coding of observable facts, interview transcripts, field notes, and reconciliation of inconsistent responses for references to lifestyle, etiquette, language, relationships, artefacts, and any other cultural items related to making the subculture of Internet scammers distinct from the mainstream culture.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

The authors complied with guidelines for research ethics in social sciences, humanities, law, and theology (Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2016: The NESH Committee). All participants received adequate information about the research (e.g., the purpose of the research, the time required, and the uses of data) before granting their consent to participate in the research. In other words, permission was sought from all participants and was freely granted by the participants before data gathering commenced. Knowing very well the ethical implications of gathering personal and sensitive data such as age, addresses, names, and any traces that could lead to the identification of participants, we opted to not gather such personal and sensitive information. This did not impede our research, because this type of information were not considered relevant to the objective of the study. Also, we carefully recorded all the interviews in our field notebooks that was later extracted for analysis.

Data Analysis

Following the methods detailed in Cohen et al. (2000, p.148), we analysed the interview data by first establishing units of analysis demonstrating how the units were similar and different. This process allowed us to establish a ‘domain analysis’, where we grouped the units and themes into a coherent set of domains to establish relationships between the domains. While maintaining relevant negative and discrepant cases in the findings, we employed verbatim expressions of the interviewees to support the description and analysis of the findings. In the end, four major themes emerged from the study and best describe the situation of the Sakawa boys in the area. The key findings are presented and discussed in the section on findings and discussion.

Findings and Discussion

From the outset, we intended to use field research to discover and report Sakawa boys the exciting, intimate, and sometimes gruesome experiences used to express their identity and make meaning using their bodies and other materials. From the data, four major themes emerged: language (slang and jargon), social life and techno-religiosity, the pageantry of commodity consumption and ostentatious lifestyle, and gender collaboration in Internet fraud. The present section reviews how these four themes operated. As the data are presented, we apply the literature and theory discussed earlier to shed light on the findings.

Theme 1: Language (Slang and Jargon)

As a cultural script, language (slang and jargon) symbolises the patterns of interaction in Sakawa subculture. Our findings captured some of the terminologies and expressions that characterise the daily language of Sakawa boys. First, vulgar or profane language appeared to be a prominent feature in the daily discourses of the Sakawa fraternity. The topics of nudity, sexual affairs, and women all constitute part of normal conversations. Apart from this, indiscreet talk or conversation characterised daily interactions, especially under the influence of alcohol, drugs, and other related substances. For example, one of the interviewees narrated how they behave when they take drugs:

Ya, ye know, when we ‘high’ we can talk anything without fear or any feeling of shame. It is not the same when you are not ‘high’. Unless you ‘go high’ before, you cannot understand what I am talking about. You can talk your feelings out. That is, any topic is possible – money, girls, sex, juju and anything you can think about (Interviewee A).

As the extract indicates, Sakawa boys are sometimes identified in the way they conduct and interact with the public. It is relatively fair to intimate that substance abuse somewhat influences other aspects of Sakawa culture in Ghana. Secondly, the use of Pidgin or ‘broken’ English—a de facto informal English language sometimes used by the lower class for commerce in West African countries, is also seen to be ubiquitous among Sakawa boys. But generally, the most common aspect of interaction amongst members of the Sakawa subculture is the remarkable use of *slang* and *jargon*—a sublanguage that seeks to protect the interest of members (Amalia, 2019; Drake, 1980).

It must be noted that some of the terminology and expressions are English but are coined connotatively to serve specific normative order in Sakawa traditions. For instance, the word ‘*high*’ in Sakawa’s language implies the influence of alcohol or drugs. To them, it is a term used to describe someone drunk, as opposed to the literal meaning of the word, which may mean elevation or rise above a particular level. The term ‘*fine*’ (drunk) takes a similar interpretation. And to ‘*hit*’ denotes making many gains or becoming successful in a grand deception. The extract below, aptly put by an informant further underscores the importance of jargons in Sakawa fraternity:

When you finally receive money from your client [the victim] we use the term ‘hit’ or ‘hitting’. It is our cryptolectal form of interaction that protects our best interest. It gives us a sense of belongingness and power to communicate freely even in public because we’re sure that our confidentiality is guaranteed (Interviewee C).

The above view of the informant is an indicator that, within the Sakawa fraternity, jargon or slang is prioritised not only for communication purposes but also for reasons of confidentiality and privacy among members. The findings here confirm what Cassiman’s (2018) studies revealed in Nima, where ‘hit’ or ‘hitting’ was a widely used term to mean successful receipt of money transfers from victims, something outside persons could not normally comprehend. Similarly, Oduro-Frimpong (2011, p.2) concluded that a ‘hit’ mainly applies to the successful receipt of money from a money transfer service, such as Western Union, WorldRemit, Remitly, TransferWise, Money Gram and so on. Based on these two views, it can be inferred that, like any other terminology and expressions in a discipline or group, jargon or slang are part of a sophisticated vocabulary structure used by individuals in some subcultures and communities in advancing their interest. Jargon and slang, thus help members of a group or community to communicate with clarity and specificity among themselves, and the Sakawa community is no exception.

Another commonly used term is ‘*pal/client*’—the target person or the potential victim or ‘*mugu*’ (Oduro-Frimpong, 2011) in scam business. In some instances, the client or pal may be hesitant in transfers of funds because they are suspicious, or for another reason. That is when the expression ‘*obiyoora*’ is used to describe how hesitant the victim is in transferring money to them. The term implies that the victim does not want to cooperate. For instances like this, the belief in supernatural powers in Internet fraud (which will be discussed later) comes into play here. And so the term ‘*gaja*’ in the Sakawa subculture describes the process of defrauding someone by pretending to offer spiritual assistance. Furthermore, the belief that success in a scam is not reduced to random chance finds expression within Sakawa culture. The belief is that a person must have the ‘*spirit*’ to make enough gains, and people who thrive in the scam industry are known as ‘*spirit*’ individuals. Those without the ‘*spirit*’ often ask successful colleagues to provide them with ‘*setting*’ or financial support, a term used to express solidarity by providing financial assistance to some colleagues who go bankrupt or who are not yet successful in the Sakawa business. In this sense of solidarity, friendship, and love for each other, one of the respondents puts it succinctly in the following excerpt:

It is not all the times that one will be in the spirit. It is just like normal business people do. At times, a business will be booming and some days’ market will not be good. What does the business fraternity normally do? They help each other, and so it is with our work [internet scam]. Sometimes you may not be in the spirit of not having clients/pals at all. And yet you must survive, you must eat and even cater to family needs. This is when ‘Setting’ is important. Sometimes, you may pay back the money

when you also start to make it, but most times you don't [sic] because the person may also be broke, and you may be in a position to also help (Interviewee B).

The above quotation lends credence to the bond of love and support that Sakawa boys display for each other by supporting others when the need arises. It is for Sakawa culture, much as the collective spirit that ties members of a certain group together, where assistance is provided for members who are in challenging circumstances. In Oduro-Frimpong (2011), the least suspicion may lead to loss of clients/pals, and that leads to bankruptcy. In this case, 'setting' becomes essential in helping others to survive while looking for potential victims.

The field data also revealed that the Sakawa fraternity is noted for using illicit drugs or substances and smoking weed, which they believe keeps them strong and active online. These drugs or substances are called 'one-line', and the mixture of alcohol with drugs like tramadol, teedar, samalin, and cough syrups for extra energy is called 'derking'. They are aware of the dangers involved in drug abuse and excessive consumption of alcohol, but they do not heed advice because of the pleasure they derive from them. The people outside the Sakawa fraternity are called 'kankanba', which means they do not smoke, drink alcohol, or engage in fraud as they do. Again, all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy, and thus, Sakawa boys have their 'raayawa' moments—recreational and leisure time in nightclubs, parties, discotheques, and outings, where they go ease stress.

Finally, a 'fada' is a master or someone knowledgeable in the game who can share ideas and experience with others, especially beginners, or 'boys'. The boys serve the masters by running errands, doing chores, sweeping, buying food, and sometimes washing the clothes of the masters. While no evidence of boys in the roles of sexual servitude was found in this study, domestic servitude was a key finding. Some Sakawa boys who are considered novice may have to spend a considerable period in service of the experienced ones, to be able to learn some basic skills in Sakawa practice. Their female counterparts, on the other hand, are mostly used or hired (especially in romance scam) as accomplices to deceive victims for money and other valuables. The masters are known by some common nicknames which include but are not limited to Baron (the common name for drug dealers), Baron Unni, Fada (leader or master of his gang), De Don, De Viper, Don Cosmos, Don Dee, and Don Black. Other names include Bozman, Zee Town Fada, Don Ayoyo, Weezy, Odi Dollar, Shatta, Bawlee, Money Man, Nana Original, Shatta Kpang, Shatta Guinea, Wiz Child, Macca, and King Berry. The excerpt below illustrates the master-servant relationship in Sakawa industry in Ghana:

I started as an apprentice or a boy in our parlance. And at that stage, you are a novice in the game, and so you need to serve your master well or else he will not teach you the tricks and the formatting [the methods and strategies] very well. You will wash your master's clothe and sometimes his car, buy food for him. You are practically the houseboy because of all the chores you have to do. And as you are committed to these things the Master when he is satisfied, will begin to teach you the secrets of the game (Interviewee C).

The extract above suggests that the Sakawa business requires skills and knowledge before one can become successful. In many cases, amateurs may have to learn the art of scam from skilful practitioners to be able to thrive in the game of Sakawa. This is consistent with Cassiman's (2018) findings that some amateur scammers, who are normally referred to as boys or beginners, learn the tricks of this trade by observing the work of a master. Although sometimes the boys may be more Internet-savvy than their masters,

they rely on them financially and materially, such as for Internet routers, Wi-Fi, laptops, and a safe workplace. In light of this, the Sakawa industry in Ghana is similar to the informal work sector in the country, marked by apprenticeships, in which persons with little expertise and knowledge must make sacrifices by serving and learning under experienced masters.

Social Life and Techno-religiosity

The wider society in northern Ghana is dismissive of the social life and behaviour of Sakawa boys. This community discourages questionable ways of earning money, so their activities are widely condemned by all the wider society, especially the traditional and religious factions, which encourage people to jettison and eschew all forms of social vices, including deceitful and dishonest ways of making a living. As a detestable group, people noted them for many character defects, including disrespect, disobedience, and rudeness, which is often attributed to the supposed prestige they gain from the Sakawa business. As demonstrated in a series of discussions, their attitude towards authority and elders is not only regarded as disrespectful, disobedient, and rude but they are also seen as braggers, taking pride in showing off material possessions. One of them said during a conversation in the following extract:

As for us, Sakawa boys, we are condemned human beings in this part of the country. People don't respect us and we don't also respect them. We don't give any damn about anybody. Nobody feeds me, even my own parents. They don't feed me and they can't tell me how to behave. They say that they don't need my money, but when I hit and give them part of it, they can't also reject it. Because I know that they need money. Even some of the elderly people in this community, beg me for money. And they are the same people who insult us here. So, the important thing is that I work very hard to hit. I know that if I hit all of them will begin to respect me, because of my money; they need it (Interviewee A).

This narrative above suggests that Sakawa boys are aware of their place in society as persons whose activities are disapproved by the general public. But to them, the condemnation is pharisaic and double-dealing, as the same persons who condemn them for their activities also come to them sometimes, when they need financial help to solve problems. Nevertheless, one commonality between interviewees that is indicated is that those who practice Sakawa are mostly unemployed and from poor communities in Ghana. Particularly, many youngsters who are into Sakawa are typically the poor and disadvantaged folk from impoverished and low-income regions in Ghana (Awiah, 2015a). Thus, participating in Sakawa activities is believed to help young people get out of the poverty line, gain the respect of family, friends and the wider society, because many of them help others, (especially family and friends), with the wealth they have gained in the Sakawa business (Halawayhi, 2014). Many of them know that Sakawa is wrong and must be avoided, but the income derived from it remains a major motivation for the influx of young people into the Sakawa business.

Furthermore, it is widely reported that many of them indulge in illicit drugs and other hard substances—cocaine, Indian hemp, codeine, smoking weed and marijuana, tramadol, and different types of energy drinks, which they claim keep them active all the time:

We take energy drinks and other drugs because we want to stay awake to meet the clients; because of the time difference, you may have to stay awake to meet with your clients in their daytime. While here is midnight it's sometimes daytime in most of the countries in the West, and so if you are not lucky to get [sic] whose night is your day and your day, and vice versa, you just have to make sure that you can have a normal chat with the person. To stay awake means you must get some help through energy drinks or some drugs (Interviewee B).

In the above expression, it is noteworthy that many indulge in drug use to keep them alert for online activities. Young people in Ghana perceive drug use as a helpful mechanism to stay awake throughout the night, especially for students who need to study (Nkyi, 2014). The night appeals to many youths in Sakawa because of the time differences between many countries in the West and the Global South.

The field data also showed evidence of flamboyant lifestyles amongst Sakawa boys. One major indicator of successful receipt of money is not only extravagant spending during festive occasions like weddings, festivals, and outdoorings, but the ostentatious display of wealth in nightclubs, party grounds, and the hip-hop genre that typifies the leisure time of youth in the Sakawa business. This resonates with Warner's (2011) work on the wearing of gold necklaces and chains and other expensive clothes displayed by persons into Sakawa in Ghana.

The quest for independence from parents and guardians also motivates boys to join the scamming fraternity in northern Ghana. The interviews revealed that Sakawa boys live in separate and often secluded apartments and houses, far from their parents. This operates to avoid family pressure and redistribution (see Cassiman, 2018, 2019 for a similar finding). The social detachment from home is reported as a major contributory factor in the increase in moral decadence witnessed lately (Vasilyev et al., 2017). For instance, the Sakawa boys may involve in other illegal activities ranging from petty thievery to robbery when the Sakawa business is not booming. This is very common when victims suspect fraud and the money is no longer coming, Sakawa boys often resort to various forms of illegal activities, including theft and robbery.

One other feature that is prominent in Internet scamming in recent times is the spiritual twist in its operations. This belief emanates from African religious archetypes of belief in magic, charms, and amulets that aim to manipulate supernatural powers in service of one's interests. In this pursuit, youth in Internet scamming engage profusely in all forms of socio-culturally grotesque instructions from traditional priests and priestesses (and sometimes imams and pastors), including sleeping in caskets and cemeteries and participating in rituals and other religious activities of animal and human sacrifice and cannibalism. These rituals result in the acquisition of mystic objects like charms and amulets, magical rings and handkerchiefs, special perfumes, or powders which are used in hypnotising victims into obedience so they carry out orders given to them. The spiritual dimension of Internet scamming is expressed in the following excerpt:

We use charms and magical powers! It is not all the time that clients will like to send you money and that is when the use of charms becomes very crucial. Sometimes the financial gain is so huge that you just have to get away from making the client release the money. Not that they are not wise and are not aware of the scam; they are but magic - the African metaphysic (whether they like it not) will compel them [victims] to send the money without a second thought (Interviewee C).

The preceding view expresses the mystery behind cyber spiritualism, which has come to form part of Internet scamming in Ghana. Techno-religiosity or cyber spiritualism is widely seen as an advanced form of cyber fraud that is backed by spiritual practices, where occultic rituals are performed, including sleeping in a grave or coffins, performing both animal sacrifices and in some cases, human sacrifices (Oduro-Frimpong, 2014). The understanding here is similar to that of existing literature on cyber spirituality, in which fraudsters confessed to having used charms to hypnotise victims to unwillingly send them money (see Armstrong, 2011; Burrell, 2012; Danquah & Longe, 2011; Tade, 2013; Warner, 2011). Stories abound about specific demands or directives required of persons on how wealth from Sakawa should be spent, including dietary prohibitions, avoiding specific places, and offering animal sacrifices on regular basis. According to popular belief, the consequences of any ritual violation is not only unthinkable but unforgivable, and may include ill-health, poverty, insanity, and even death. This agrees with Oduro-Frimpong's (2014) findings of some purported ritual rules that need to be observed, including regular spiritual cleansing, spending one's riches in particular ways, being prohibited from certain places, owning particular types of houses and cars, going backwards into one's home, and avoiding sexual intercourse during certain times.

Whatever the case may be, the young men and women who join the Sakawa subculture are usually unemployed, live in deprived communities, and indulge in unorthodox means, including Sakawa, to survive. Though the wealth displayed by Sakawa boys generates moral concern, especially when young individuals become affluent overnight, some participants rationalised their involvement by contrasting what they do with how corrupt government officials loot state coffers, and how colonialism robbed Africa, leaving the continent in a complete state of lack. The practice of Sakawa also demonstrates the extreme forms of inequality and unevenly distributed national resources and opportunities, which characterise the social world of many Ghanaians and thereby pushes many people to resort to unorthodox means of earning a living, including the Sakawa industry. Thus, the Sakawa subculture confirms the notion that fewer opportunities exist for Ghana's less privileged and the poor to make a decent living.

Gender Collaboration in Internet Fraud

Until now, Internet fraud and other cyberspace related infractions in Ghana were male-dominated (Warner, 2011). But in recent times, a concern has been raised about the increase in female involvement in Internet fraud in the country (Burrell, 2012; Cassiman, 2018, 2019; Warner, 2011). This is due to gender Internet fraud through online dating or friendship and romance scams. It is called the 'man-woman format' or 'gender role switching' (Cassiman, 2019 p. 5), or 'swapping' (Burrell, 2012) when online male scammers 'exchange' gender and sex roles with females through fake profiles and accounts with erotic images of attractive women to defraud victims. The males consistently collaborate with their girlfriends, sisters, and lady friends in executing grand plots, especially when victims demand face-to-face interaction. The following response lends credence to the question of the female role in Internet scamming:

There is no way the client will not demand a video or audio form of interaction, and that is where our ladies come into the game. We will arrange with them to engage the client on our behalf in return for some percentage of the gains that come out of the venture. To some of the ladies, it is pure business for them; they do that for monetary gain. Some will charge you before they engage your client. They charge based

on minutes. Some 300 GHS for 30 minutes and 500 GHS for one hour, respectively. But charges invariably depend on the subject and content of the conversation. If it involves nude pictures and naked video chat, the charges are much higher than just normal chat (Interviewee J).

As the preceding excerpt indicates, gender is an integral part of the Sakawa business in Ghana, and it is employed by those who are into romance scams, where young ladies are recruited to handle matters of video and audio calls of potential victims. The story of Hawa and Zainab (female accomplices) is anecdotal evidence of gender collaboration in the Ghanaian Internet fraud business in the works of Cassiman, (2018, 2019). According to Cassiman, (2018, 2019), many ladies have gained notoriety for the famous roles they play as phone -girls for Sakawa boys in Accra's Nima community. They are legendary in cunningly assisting Sakawa boys to obtain money and other valuables from potential victims (mainly foreigners), and inducing victims into investing in non-existent businesses and deals.

It is reported that some of the women, after being introduced into the game by the guys, now independently conduct romance scams by themselves, in which their bodies play the most effective tools for the ready transfer of cash from victims. The use of nude pictures and nude videos remains the most effective power of negotiation and deception for female scammers.

It provides them with enormous leverage over their male counterparts in online dating or romance scams. A female scammer shared her thoughts on this subject in the following passage:

I don't collaborate with anybody [male scammers] any longer; we didn't know what goes into it [online dating scam]; we were only doing the bidding of game boys, including sending naked pictures, and you can even naked yourself in front of web-cam just to help a game boy to make a 'hit' for some small proceed in return. And at times they [game boys] don't even want to pay for your service after the agreed percentage. Now that we know the tricks ourselves, we don't wait to commodify our bodies which is our pride for some meagre amount of money. We make our own money now through online dating (Interviewee I).

The above narrative indicates two factors responsible for the influx of female fraudsters into the Internet scamming business: experience and the dissatisfaction/disappointment from male counterparts who engage in their services. While they allude to the fact that male fraudsters take them for granted in procuring their services in terms of disbursing proceeds fairly, accumulated experience over time also paved the way for them to go into the Sakawa business independently. In Burrell's work (2012), gender-swapping is not limited to males in Sakawa, but on several occasions, their female counterparts pose as men of varying ages, heights, races, and nationalities primarily directed at matching potential targets online.

The Pageantry of Commodity Consumption and the Ostentatious Lifestyle

Our sense of fashion and aesthetic consciousness has a significant social influence on our behaviour and attitudes. And so it is with the life of the Sakawa guild in Tamale and Yendi. While their counterparts in Yendi is limited to the use of motorbikes and less expensive wears, perhaps because of the less developed nature of the area, one of the distinctive features of these groups in the Tamale metropolis, is the quintessence of fashion and a high sense of aesthetic sensibilities. Noted for their ostentatious lifestyles,

ingrained in a ubiquitous display of riches including driving flashy cars, donning expensive clothing, and owning magnificent apartments easily betray them to the general public (Darko, 2015, p.1). Understanding these differences is consistent with the cultural dynamism theory, which proposes that, while culture is complex and universal, it is often very specific and adaptive to one's surroundings and prevailing circumstances.

The apparent competition for gratification by conspicuous consumption of cultural capital make the lives of scammers enviable, especially from peers outside their gang. They receive applause as pioneers of the latest cars, electronic gadgets such as televisions, woofer speakers, and similar items. A closed observation revealed several motivations for this lifestyle:

We like fashion and wear expensive wears because we want to impress and woo ladies. And the display of cash during social gatherings like weddings and outdoor ceremonies is a way of proving to people that we have money. You know if you have the money you don't need to hide; you must demonstrate that, and even if you don't do that the money will expose you (Interviewee D).

The preceding is resonant with previous findings on the dramatisation of material possessions by Sakawa boys as means of demonstrating social status for popularity and attracting women (Baylon & Antwi-Boasiako, 2016; Darko, 2015; Morton, 2011; Warner, 2011). In Vasilyev and colleagues' (2017) studies, the motivation for material goods for prestige rather than needs is observed as the typical predominant behaviour of the modern consumer in the commodity market. Reports exist in many Ghanaian communities where young people in Sakawa own expensive properties, drive exotic cars, show off expensive clothing and jewels and inhabit lavish apartments. Mohammed et al. (2019) present ample evidence that the Sakawa culture thrives on peer influence. Once others see their colleagues driving in posh and exotic cars, wearing high-quality designer wears, living ostentatious lifestyles, and going out with beautiful ladies, they easily get lured into it.

Another aesthetic feature of the subculture of Sakawa and the penchant for expensive material goods by Sakawa boys, is succinctly revealed in the following excerpt by a prominent member of a group when asked why some of them value expensive commodities:

We like using expensive and quality commodities. That is a good observation you have made. But our taste especially when it comes to cars varies; it ranges from G-Wagon to Range Rover, Land Rover, Porsche, Jaguar, Tundra, Brabus, Bugatti, Pagani, Mercedes-Benz, Aston Martin to many other modern cars. Of course, you don't expect us to drive in cars that are common in the system or use the lower quality ones everybody uses. No! The difference must be shown clearly; it is a way of constructing the difference- the easiest way of showing our identity and uniqueness should be reflective in our conspicuous consumption (Interviewee D).

Our curiosity about the use of expensive and latest model smartphones and laptops also elicited revealing responses. The most common types of smartphones amongst members include the following: iPhone 3G King's Button, iPhone, Princess Plus, iPhone11 pro-Max, iPhone XR, and Vertu Signature Diamond. Others include Black Diamond VIPN Smartphone, Vertu Signature Cobra, GoldVish Le Million, and Diamond Rose iPhone 432 GB. Apart from the notoriety they earned in using this type of mobile phones, our investigation also revealed efficiencies and network friendliness which allow them to navigate through cyberspace undetected. One interlocutor did not mince words in the following response:

There are reasons why we use the high class of mobile phones, apart from the fame in using them the quality in accessing a network to stay online always even when you're outside your room is very crucial to our game [referring to internet scam]. It is portable and can replace the laptop when you are outside the room. There are things the phones do that the laptops can't do. For instance, how do you carry laptops wherever you go? That can even expose you as a scammer, but for phones almost everyone now uses phones. So, the phones serve multipurpose in this job (Interviewee O).

The above extract underscores the motives of the insatiate craze for expensive and higher quality electrical gadgets such as the laptops and mobile phones used by scammers. Higher quality mobile phones, for instance, not only ensure easy browsing and are easily carried but also ensure secrecy against the public eye. According to Awiah (2015), the lifestyle of young men and women in Sakawa can only be compared to persons in the business community. Their expenditures on the latest electronic gadgets, fashionable designer clothes, mobile phones, watches, and shoes are enough to buy a three-bedroom apartment for a middle-class family in Ghana (Awiah, 2015a). Although they are young, the exotic cars they drive, the mansions and property they own, is not affordable to the ordinary Ghanaian worker, and at times people wonder how they come to live such as lifestyle.

The rise in popular culture also has conferred on celebrities and other public figures the status of demigods. Consequently, the influence of these figures undoubtedly shapes the lives of the younger generation, and the scamming communities are no exemption. They are massive consumers of popular hip-hop culture, so the famous musicians in this genre in Ghana including Sarkodie, Stonebwoy, Shatta Wale, Fancy Gadam, Maccassio, and other musicians are idolised in the scammer fraternity in the country. The findings here are analogous to studies of Cassiman (2018, 2019) about the choice of music amongst Internet scammers in Accra and Nima, Ghana. This is an empirical indication that hip-hop as a genre seems to form part of the leisure and recreational moments of scammers in Ghana.

Our findings also suggest that youth in Sakawa are regular attendees of expensive night-clubs and discotheques, as well as patronising expensive restaurants and hotels. Such entertainment centres become places of mystique and recreation for them, which Paul Willis (2000) called ethnographic imagination, a newfound means of notoriety, in recent times. In this regard, one is reminded here of the original contribution this brings to the understanding of contemporary lifestyle, use of objects, artefacts and communicative modes, which is not only core to new perspectives of analysis of commodity fetishism, but also important for understanding contemporary forms of lifestyle and social relations.

In a melancholic outburst, Vasilyev et al., (2017) bewailed the weakening of traditional ties and cultural etiquette that have sadly been replaced with a modern and expensive lifestyle that characterise Sakawa culture. Expensive lifestyles appear to be common among youth in the Sakawa culture. One informant whose panther-like physique, conspicuous tattoos, and hippie dressing style explained in a group interview:

My tattoo, design and style of dressing represent our brand. It is our style of dressing and lifestyle. You see this 'crazy' jean I'm wearing [pointing to his tight and perforated jean trouser] If I tell you the price you will be shocked. Most of them are American brand of jeans, and you see that these are the style of dressing the American celebrities, especially those in the music industry. And some of us listen to their songs too (Interviewee G).

The above extract reveals some patterns of lifestyle of the Sakawa boys. The wearing of rasta hairstyles, unkempt hairstyles, and awkward haircuts, neon-yellow dyed hair, tight

jeans, a penchant for bleaching the skin, and tattoos and earrings are all forms by which the group express their identity. Darko (2015) discovered that the mode of dressing, which includes tight jeans and baseball caps, gives them away. It is instructive, therefore, that the views expressed illustrate the influence of popular Western culture on the youth, especially those in Sakawa as they expressed an identity like many groups in the Western world.

Conclusion

The above discussion is an ethnographic attempt to conceptualise how Sakawa boys use their bodies and other material cultural forms to express their identity in Ghana. Fifteen Sakawa boys participated in in-depth semi-structured interviews and five informal focus group discussions. The interviews sought to extract information on the patterns of interactions and behaviour, including aesthetic consciousness and sensibilities, ostentatious lifestyle, commodity consumption, social life, language, and other related character idiosyncrasies that expressed their fundamental identity. As a result, four main themes were carved from the interviews for discussion and analysis: language (slang and jargon), social life and techno-religiosity, the pageantry of commodity consumption and ostentatious lifestyle, and gender collaboration in Internet fraud. Among other interesting findings, the study found that the relationship between the Sakawa boys and their cultural items are practically and sensuously involved in creating their identity as a subcultural entity in Ghana. The use of slang and jargon is a cryptographic tool to ensure the confidentiality and privacy of the group. They crave for ostentatious lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of goods and services, form part of their cultural identity, and enhance their prestige and social status within mainstream culture. Also, the techno-religious model of Internet scamming, which involves invoking supernatural powers to succeed in Sakawa business in recent years, is integral in the creation of the identity of the Sakawa subculture. Finally, gender collaboration in Sakawa's practice, in which young, beautiful women help Sakawa boys to defraud unsuspected lovers through online dating scams, continues to form part of the personality of Sakawa boys as a subcultural embodiment in Ghana.

Since sufficient measures have not been taken to provide employment opportunities to ensure a decent livelihood in a country teeming with unemployed graduates, Sakawa boys rationalise their activities as a way of surviving the harsh realities of unemployment. Ghana's lack of employment opportunities, widespread inequality, and corruption have caused despondency and institutional disillusionment for young people, making many of them vulnerable to illegal means of earning a living. And Sakawa, to many people, is believed as a testimony to State's failure to provide job opportunities for its citizens and exponential decay of family values among northerners. Therefore, we suggest that government investment policies should, among other things, encourage private investors and developers to generate more work prospects for the large numbers of unemployed graduates and make the informal sectors more inclusive for those young people who are better situated in the informal sector of the economy. This study is limited, however, to only how Sakawa boys create and express their identity by way of language use, conspicuous consumption of material goods and ostentatious lifestyles, techno-religious lifestyles, and gender collaboration in Internet fraud. Still, it can offer leads and innovative methods for our collective fight against the menace of cybercrimes; and decrease school dropout among others in the country. It may also be a useful guide in future attempts to study other aspects of youth in a crime or antisocial and deviant behaviours in school or countries where cybercrime is a serious problem.

Limitations and Future Research

The findings of this study are limited in their scope, as it involved only fifteen key informants, and thus may not be generalizable to other populations. Future research about youth in the scamming business should consider the attitudes and behaviours of adolescent scammers in school settings. We strongly feel that this line of research would be useful since most Sakawa boys stop school and, largely, become role models for young children in some communities in the northern region of Ghana.

Funding Open access funding provided by University Of South-Eastern Norway.

Declarations

Conflict of Interest The authors complied with guidelines for research ethics in social sciences, humanities, law, and theology (Norwegian National Research Ethics Committees, 2016: The NESH Committee), www.etikkom.no. The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest, and all participants involved in this study freely and willingly agreed to participate in the study.

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