ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis:	HUMAN TRAFFICKING AS A CYBERCRIME: A RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY PERSPECTIVE
	Jordan C. Roberts, Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Sciences, 2022
Thesis directed by:	Associate Professor, Bianca Bersani, Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice

Human trafficking is a global problem that has devastated millions of lives, and research has shown that the Internet has further facilitated this crime due to its anonymity and ease of communication. The primary aim of this research is to examine how the online environment has changed criminal opportunity for human trafficking by looking at it from a rational choice theory perspective. This criminological theory helps to elaborate opportunity factors of online human trafficking through its seven choice structuring properties. The proposed study will involve semi-structured interviews with convicted human traffickers who utilized the Internet to their advantage. The findings of this study will shed light on human traffickers' methods and motives, and why the Internet is such an optimal, low-risk environment for criminal activity. More specifically, the results will examine themes across each choice structuring property of rational choice theory in regard to online human trafficking. Finding these answers will allow law enforcement officials to create evidence-based policies and practices that will actively mitigate human trafficking online, in turn saving many victims lives.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AS A CYBERCRIME: A RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY
PERSPECTIVE

by

Jordan Roberts

Thesis submitted to the Department of Criminology and Criminal Justice
at the University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Arts
2021

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Bianca Bersani for all her teachings, help, and feedback throughout my entire time in the CCJS Honors Program. She has taught me so much about the components of research studies which ultimately led to the creation of this thesis. Without her useful class content or thorough comments on my work, writing this thesis would have been much tougher.

I would also like to thank my CCJS Honors Program cohort for all of their insight and feedback across these semesters on my work. It was great to have a supportive group of fellow students who were in the same boat as me throughout this journey.

Shoutout to my parents and friends for always being there for me as well.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

Human trafficking is a global issue that has devastated millions of lives. There have been over 45.8 million victims of human trafficking worldwide, and approximately 11 million of these victims have been children (Rhodes 2017; The Child Liberation Foundation 2021). Since the start of the pandemic, increased economic strain has sparked a rise in human trafficking numbers as well (UNODC 2021). This can be attributed to the loss of legitimate jobs, such that some people have turned to methods of income such as prostitution to earn money to survive (UNODC 2021). However, resorting to these desperate measures makes those people vulnerable for exploitation.

The issue of human trafficking has been recognized for decades, and the Internet has perpetuated this type of crime due to its anonymity and ease of communication. For instance, people can mask their identity and instantaneously message others on the Internet. This trend is evident because as of 2021, 75% of trafficked minors report being sold online (Polaris 2021). Any crime that is committed on the Internet is known as a cybercrime, and this has become increasingly prevalent in the domain of human trafficking since the Internet opens up new spaces and opportunities for criminals to act upon.

This sparks an area of interest for criminological research because explaining how cybercrimes are evolving will allow law practitioners to adapt to the changing nature of criminal opportunity so that they can develop better ways to mitigate these crimes. With better practices and laws in place, we will be able to help reduce human trafficking cases, which will in turn save lives and make the world safer. This research focuses specifically on the dark web, which has further facilitated the scope and capabilities of human trafficking. A rational choice theory perspective offers a framework for exploring these online opportunities for criminals.

The primary aim of this research is to examine how the online environment has changed criminal opportunity for human trafficking. Such as, how has the Internet helped to facilitate different aspects of human trafficking? Answering this question will build an understanding of how the growing presence of the Internet in our society has had an influence on criminal activity. This research question will also help to fill gaps in criminological literature. Even though past studies have examined the ways in which the Internet creates an ideal environment for criminals in general, there have not been any studies which use a theoretical perspective to explain the prosperity of online human trafficking specifically. Additionally, the few studies that have examined the intersection of human trafficking and rational choice theory have neglected to delve into choice structuring properties. And the even fewer studies that look at human trafficking as a cybercrime only touch the surface of how rational choice theory helps to explain it. Conducting this study will help to further the application of rational choice theory on human trafficking with the inclusion of present-day cybercrime techniques. It will also provide insight on the underlying reasons why the Internet provides such an opportunity for crime to take place and how this spills over into real world effects. Therefore, this study will help to guide future research and policies that aim to help mitigate human trafficking.

Chapter 2: Human Trafficking and the Dark Web

Human trafficking can be defined as "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of persons… for the purpose of exploitation" (Rhodes 2017:2). Exploitation can include sexual services (prostitution), forced labor, and/or the removal of organs (Rhodes 2017). This form of modern-day slavery involves the use of threat, force, coercion, abduction, fraud, and/or deception (Rhodes 2017). Traditional human trafficking (without the use of the Internet) involves conducting all the criminal operations in-person. This can include processes such as advertising, recruiting, harboring, and transporting victims, and selling to buyers (Rhodes 2017). The fully in-person aspect of traditional human trafficking puts the offender in many high-risk situations in which they could be caught, reported, and/or physically harmed themselves. A contributor to this is the unpredictability of other people and situations. Victims may retaliate, buyers may cross the offender, or there may be witnesses or surveillance systems on the streets. All of these uncontrollable factors make human trafficking a risky operation. Human trafficking is global problem which has affected millions of people (Rhodes 2017). In recent years, this problem has expanded and intensified due to the increased prevalence of cybercrime, since the online environment provides criminals with anonymous methods of operation, payment, and communication (Polaris 2021). So, with the rise of the Internet also came a new environment for criminals to operate in, specifically the dark web.

The general Internet that most people are familiar with and use is called the surface web (Rhodes 2017). Anything that is not the surface web is known as the deep web, and this is over 500 times the size of the surface web (Rhodes 2017). A portion of the deep web is the dark web, which is optimal for criminal activity since it provides users with (almost) guaranteed anonymity. This is attributed to the use of onion encryption, which makes it so that the route of access to a

website must go through multiple "layers" (Rhodes 2017). At each layer, the user's IP address (the identifying string of characters attached to a computer) is encrypted and sent to another server for the next layer, and the destination website only sees the last IP address (Rhodes 2017). This makes tracking down the original IP address extremely difficult, if not impossible. Furthermore, the dark web is easily accessible through search engines such as TOR (The Onion Router), which do not record search activity (Rhodes 2017). Thus, the dark web makes it easy for anyone to operate anonymously and without much of a trace.

The heightened anonymity creates the perfect environment for human traffickers to operate in. It allows them to communicate with potential victims and buyers with ease, such that recruiting, advertising, and selling can be done very efficiently. No longer does a human trafficker need to try and solicit victims by interacting with them in real life. They can now do this from the safety and control of their home, where their location is easily obfuscated through onion encryption. The dark web also allows for untraceable transactions to be completed when selling victims, since cryptocurrency is the most common form of payment (Rhodes 2017). Being able to conduct monetary transactions online benefits the human trafficker because that eliminates a high-risk interaction that would have originally needed to be done in-person. Despite these seemingly malevolent advantages to the dark web, it should be noted that the dark web is not inherently bad – it just makes it easier to do illegal activities.

Chapter 3: Rational Choice Theory and Human Trafficking

Rational choice theory is a criminological theory that is based on the assumptions that humans are rational, have agency (free will), and have utilitarian beliefs, such that people will reason their decisions to yield maximum benefits and low costs (Cornish and Clarke 1986). Such that, offenders do a cost-benefit analysis of the crime by weighing the potential rewards and potential costs, then they make a rational decision based on that evaluation (Becker 1968). The primary reward would be utility benefits such as financial gain, and the costs would be variables such as the likelihood of being caught and the severity of punishment if they were to be caught (Becker 1968). For instance, a person may rationally choose to steal a fancy watch left in someone's car that is parked on a street with no security cameras or streetlights, because the monetary yield is high for the low likelihood of being caught. However, if the fancy watch is left in a car that is in a high traffic area, then the person would probably choose to not engage in the crime since the value of the watch would not be worth the high risk of being seen and being sent to jail. The reasoning in these hypotheticals is consistent with findings from an automobile theft study done by Clarke and Harris (1992).

The aforementioned assumptions lead to the potential for criminal opportunities, which are then facilitated by seven choice structuring properties (CSPs) (Cornish and Clarke 1987). These CSPs include the number of targets and accessibility, familiarity, monetary yield, expertise, time required, physical danger, and risk of apprehension. CSPs are essentially all of the elements of a crime that a criminal may use to rationalize and consider when making decisions. The combination of the assumptions, criminal opportunity, and CSPs can then lead to a criminal event.

When examining human trafficking as a street crime, past research suggests that rational choice theory can explain human traffickers' actions during decision-making, recruitment, and exploitation (Lutya and Lanier 2012; Winterdyk 2020). The decision-making process is dependent on free will, the demand for the goods and/or services, and how accessible and vulnerable the victims are (Lutya and Lanier 2012; Winterdyk 2020). Recruitment is dependent on free will, power inequality between the trafficker and the victim, lifestyle exposure of the victim, and recruitment location (Lutya and Lanier 2012; Winterdyk 2020). Lifestyle exposure includes things like the need for economic, social, or mental advancement. Such that, people who come from poverty-stricken areas, dysfunctional home lives, or who are naive or desperate are most often targeted by human traffickers. Additionally, the decision to recruit certain victims can be dependent on the demands of the market (i.e., based on gender, race, or age preferences). Exploitation is dependent on individuals' proneness to victimization and the monetary revenue to be gained from forcing victims into prostitution (Lutya and Lanier 2012). All these factors play a role in the human trafficker's cost-benefit analysis to determine if the potential gains would be worth committing the crime.

Although rational choice theory was originally used by criminologists to help explain why criminals engage in street crime, it can help to explain why human trafficking has become a cybercrime as well. The ease of use of online markets and the difficulty for law enforcement to trace Internet activity (especially on the dark web) makes online human trafficking a crime of low risk and high reward (Bartsch 2019). It has also been posited that human traffickers use rational choice theory to make decisions on whether to allow their victims to have access to the Internet or cell phones (Bouché and Shady 2017). Despite the lack of past research on this specific topic, the dark web provides ample CSPs for human traffickers, which is why it is the

perfect environment for criminal opportunity and why cybercrime is so widespread and hard to

prevent. The following sub sections will delve into how each of the seven CSPs relate to online

human trafficking specifically, and there are examples provided of what each CSP would look

like for offline versus online human trafficking (See Table 1).

Number of Targets and Accessibility

The number of targets is the amount of victims the human trafficker contacted and/or sold

(successfully or attempted to), and accessibility is how easy or difficult it was for the human

trafficker to contact victims, take victims, and sell to buyers. As of July 2021, 4.48 billion people

use social media worldwide (Dean 2021). Not only is the Internet used by people across the

world, but it also has no clear jurisdiction or geographical limit since it is possible to talk to

anyone from anywhere at any time (Burbano and Hernandez-Alvarez 2017). Thus, the Internet

provides a large number of potential targets that offenders can have communication access to

with no time or space barriers. And the natural deterrent of having to go out in public to handle

this criminal operation has been removed. Human traffickers typically contact potential victims

through social networking sites, messaging platforms, online forums, and/or classified

advertisements (Villota 2019). This variety of content across various platforms also makes

tracing information difficult (Burbano and Hernandez-Alvarez 2017).

Advertising allows for messages to reach a widespread audience, since so many people

use the Internet each day. Thus, there is a large number of targets. For the initial stages of human

trafficking, this could either be the trafficker advertising to entice victims, or the victim

advertising their own services (Rhodes 2017). This makes the victims easily accessible to

traffickers. Furthermore, advertisements can be posted across many different platforms and

places so that they reach even more people (Rhodes 2017). For when the victims are being sold,

advertising also plays a role since they are now readily available on the market for buyers to view and purchase (Rhodes 2017).

Recruiting also targets a large number of people to try and gain access to them. One tactic is to promote false advertisements. For human trafficking, these advertisements are often portrayed to be for modeling, waitresses, dancers, or even nannies (Cherry 2018). In addition to using misleading advertisements, human traffickers utilize social media to gather information on victims and groom them from fake profiles with fake relationship intentions (Rhodes 2017). By doing this, traffickers gain the victim's trust which they then use to extort provocative photos and personal information from the victims (Rhodes 2017). Thus, human traffickers use social engineering and manipulation techniques to access their victims through recruiting.

Familiarity

Familiarity is how *acquainted* one is with an environment, situation, or task (Oxford Languages 2021). The majority of people across the world are familiar with the Internet. As of January 2021, there were 4.46 billion Internet users globally (Johnson 2021). And if someone wants to learn how to use the deep web, this is not hard to do since it is easily accessible through search engines (Rhodes 2017). As noted before, anonymity is an important part of committing cybercrimes. Creating different identities online is fairly easy and does not require much technical knowledge to do (Villota 2019). This in turn makes it possible for people with even low levels of familiarity on the Internet to mask their identity, pretend to be someone else, and gain victims' trust.

Still, the Internet is an ever-changing environment. This is especially true for the dark web since illegal activities are taking place and criminals need to be adaptable and inconsistent to avoid getting caught. For instance, in order to access a particular website on the dark web, the

visitor needs to know where to find the website or else it will be virtually impossible to locate it (Weimann 2016). Additionally, URLs on the dark web change frequently so that they are harder for law enforcement to trace (Weimann 2016). The dynamic aspect of websites on the dark web makes it extremely difficult for anyone to locate where to find them, so even if one is very familiar with the dark web or specific websites, it could easily be changed without them knowing.

Monetary Yield

Monetary yield is how much money the human trafficker profited from their crimes. Human trafficking is a very prosperous market because of the high profit margin for selling victims. According to the Polaris Project (2017), which aims to fight against sex and labor trafficking, human trafficking is a $150 billion industry. More specifically, each victim sells for approximately $4,000 to $50,000 (IDB 2006). These large sums of money being transferred over the Internet are often in the form of cryptocurrencies, such as Bitcoin or Ethereum. Cryptocurrency can be held without having to reveal any personally identifying information (Rhodes 2017). Thus, this method of payment is preferred by dark web connoisseurs, since it allows for easy, quick, anonymous transactions. Cryptocurrencies help drive these dark web markets, which further allows for the selling and buying of human trafficking victims.

However, selling on the deep web comes with its own risks and drawbacks as well. The online market is more competitive than the offline market since consumers can easily compare products and prices (Weber and Kruisbergen 2019). Additionally, sellers need good customer service, photos, and descriptions of the product, which requires more back-end effort from the human trafficker (Weber and Kruisbergen 2019). Overall, human trafficking online has the

potential for a large monetary yield through anonymous payments, despite the more competitive market.

Expertise

Expertise is how *knowledgeable* one is about the environment, situation, or task (Oxford Languages, 2021). This is very similar to familiarity, except it involves a higher degree of mastery. To use the Internet in general, it does not require much expertise since it is very accessible and user friendly. However, expertise on how to traverse the dark web to find a desired website and remain fully anonymous would more so be needed. As discussed previously, websites on the dark web are very hard to locate, so being an expert on where to find specific websites would aid a human trafficker in gaining access to the online resources needed to advertise, sell, and buy victims (Weimann 2016). Additionally, even though onion encryption obfuscates the user's IP address through a multiple step process, that is only one layer to full anonymity. In 2015, researchers at MIT discovered a method of how to find someone's original IP address when they try to access a dark web website through TOR (Katti, Katabi, and Puchala 2015). However, this method only worked if there was a specific website as a point of reference for what was trying to be accessed, and dark web URLs are ever changing so this method would be difficult to fully implement (Katti, Katabi, and Puchala 2015). Even so, knowing advanced strategies on how to remain anonymous would greatly benefit human traffickers, since that would make it nearly impossible for law enforcement to track them down. Additionally, business expertise may be useful for handling transactions and storing the money securely. Thus, although expertise on how to traverse the dark web is not necessary for human traffickers to commit their crimes, it would help them operate with a lower risk of being caught.

Time Required

Time required is how much time the human trafficker put into the crime and how long it took for the crime to be successful. As previously mentioned, there are no time or space restrictions when talking to targets online, since the Internet can be accessed from anywhere at any time. This allows for human traffickers to engage in speedy communication, advertising, recruiting, and payments (Villota 2019). Additionally, with all of those processes being conducted online from one's own device, most transportation time from location to location can be cut out as a factor. Thus, human trafficking online is less time-consuming than when it is conducted in-person.

Physical Danger

Physical danger is the risk of harm to the human trafficker. The aspects of human trafficking that occur online (i.e., advertising, recruiting, payments) have no risk of physical danger in and of themselves, since these processes can all be conducted from a computer in the safety of one's own home. Such that, a human trafficker can instigate parts of the crime online and once they are done, they can return to their real world lives as if nothing happened (Villota 2019). This makes online interactions optimal for maximizing benefits and minimizing costs in regard to physical danger. However, these online interactions eventually lead to real life danger in the cases of human trafficking since the offender will need physical access to and control of the victim. This is usually done by gaining the victim's trust and having them tell the offender their location or arranging a meet up with the offender (Rhodes 2017). Despite this real-life spillover, the numerous aspects of human trafficking that could occur solely online help to mitigate much of the risk of physical danger, especially in comparison to if everything needed to be handled in-person.

Risk of Apprehension

Risk of apprehension is how likely it is for the human trafficker to be detected and caught. The risk of apprehension is lowered if there are no physical interactions or danger since there is less potential to be caught by police or surveillance cameras when conducting crimes over the Internet. And as mentioned previously, the dark web provides (almost) guaranteed anonymity from the use of onion encryption and cryptocurrency payment methods (Rhodes 2017). This makes finding and apprehending specific targets incredibly difficult. Additionally, simply finding evidence of human trafficking on the dark web is a difficult task. Usually to find something specific online, natural language processing (NLP) techniques are used (Rhodes 2017). However, human traffickers evade being found by NLP by using deliberate data obfuscation (Rhodes 2017). This evasion often involves misspelling, uncommon words, Unicode characters, and/or complex website structure. Thus, the lack of physical contact, the anonymity of the dark web, and data obfuscation all contribute to the lowered risk of apprehension.

Table 1. CSP Comparison of Offline vs. Online Human Trafficking Case Element Examples

CSP	Street Crime (offline)	Cybercrime (online)
Number of Targets & Accessibility	The number of people who see an ad posted by a bus stop	The number of people who see an as posted on a popular website
Familiarity	Knowledge of the area in which they operate in	Knowledge on how to use the Internet
Monetary Yield	Profit from the crime	Profit from the crime
Expertise	Mastery of how to lure and kidnap victims on the streets	Mastery of how to traverse the dark web
Time Required	Time spent finding victims in real life settings	Time spent contacting victims through online platforms
Physical Danger	Need to go out on the streets to conduct all the crime	Able to conduct most of the crime from a computer at home

Risk of Apprehension	There are police, cameras, and potential witnesses on the streets	Online behavior can be nearly impossible to track if the right precautions are taken

Chapter 4: Data, Measures, and Methods

Data

In-depth data on specific human trafficking cases are not publicly available. To conduct this study, thorough semi-structured interviews will be completed with five recently convicted human traffickers. Five human trafficking cases would allow the researcher to dive deep into each case, while still providing enough data to analyze themes that arise. For instance, in a study done on illness perceptions, the researchers interviewed five dyads and were able to derive useful insights from those people (McCluskey et al. 2011). Interview questions for the current study will be based on the assessment aspects described for each CSP in the following section, and the responses during the interviews will be transcribed for later data analysis. To qualify for this study, the human trafficking cases chosen must fulfill all the following inclusion criteria:

1. The case involved human trafficking.
2. The offender committed a cybercrime.
3. The case occurred within the past five years.
4. The offender committed their crimes in Maryland.

This study will encompass any form of human trafficking exploitation. If the case involves the human trafficker utilizing the Internet to contact or sell victims in any capacity, then the case will be classified as a cybercrime. All other cases will be classified as a street crime. Collecting data from cases within the past five years would help to ensure that the methods used by the human traffickers align with modern technological methods and trends. This would help researchers because staying updated with how criminals conduct their illegal activities online will help us better understand the current online environment and dynamics. Human trafficking cases from Maryland were chosen because Maryland is highly urbanized, with Baltimore being its biggest city and Washington D.C. being very close by. Researching human trafficking cases from city environments would be optimal for data availability since cities are highly populated

19

and have increased crime rates. Additionally, Maryland has a major airport (BWI) and many rest stops, truck stops, and bus stations which run along the East Coast. These types of locations have been shown to be hotspots for human trafficking (MHTTF 2022). Thus, Maryland is more likely to have a big sampling frame, potential respondents, and potential data to be collected.

Qualifying participants will be contacted by mail. The letter will give a brief synopsis of what the study is about, request the recipient's participation, and offer them and potentially their family monetary incentive to participate in the study. Some examples of human traffickers to be interviewed for this study could include Kenneth Wayne Hart, Gerald Marshall, and Sean Dean – all of whom were identified through the Department of Justice website. Hart was sentenced in October 2020, and his crimes involved advertising victims on websites that were made specifically for commercial sex exchanges (DOJ 2020). Marshall was sentenced in May 2021, and his crimes involved forcing victims to advertise themselves online for commercial sex acts along with providing buyers with explicit photos (DOJ 2021). Dean was sentenced in July 2021, and his crimes involved using social media and other messaging platforms to recruit, monitor, direct, and communicate with his victims (DOJ 2021).

Domains of Inquiry

Number of Targets and Accessibility

Assessment aspects to consider for the number of targets are how many victims were contacted, responded to the contact, were attempted to be sold, and were successfully sold. Accessibility will be assessed based on how many victims the human trafficker was able to contact and/or take across a specific amount of time, and how much time and effort was required to market and sell the victim(s).

Familiarity

As stated previously, familiarity is how acquainted one is with an environment, situation, or task (Oxford Languages 2021). In this case, the environment would be the Internet or the real-life places in which the human trafficking took place, the situation would be the circumstances the human trafficker was in, and the task would be the human trafficking processes. Some assessment aspects to account for are the human trafficker's criminal history, level of Internet and dark web experience (if applicable), education level, employment history, social or professional connections, and the environment in which they grew up (i.e., did they grow up in the streets and learn how those dynamics operate?).

Monetary Yield

Assessment aspects that should be examined for monetary yield are the total amount of money made, the amount of money made per victim, the year(s) in which the crime was conducted (to account for inflation), how long it took for the money to be made, and how much effort and resources were put into making the money.

Expertise

Expertise is the same as familiarity, except with a much higher degree of mastery. Thus, the same assessment aspects are relevant: the human trafficker's criminal history, level of Internet and dark web experience (if applicable), education level, employment history, social or professional connections, and the environment in which they grew up. Since familiarity and expertise are so similar, one set of questions could be used to assess both.

Time Required

Assessment aspects to consider for time required are how much time was put into the human trafficking processes (i.e., recruiting, advertising, selling, etc.), and how much time was required from the initial contact with each victim to when they were each sold.

Physical Danger

Some assessment aspects to examine for physical danger are the environments and situations in which the human trafficker operated in, and various characteristics of those factors. This includes but is not limited to whether they operated inside their own space (i.e., on the Internet) or out in the streets, the people they do business with, the relationship / trust between them and their associates, level of privacy, and sociocultural factors of the environment.

Risk of Apprehension

The assessment aspects for risk of apprehension are similar to that of physical danger, and include the environment (i.e., are there surveillance cameras, lighting, people around, etc.), are they working with other people and can they trust them, how much privacy and anonymity they have (either online or in real life), and to what degree they are traceable (i.e., do they leave much evidence behind?).

Methodology

This research aims to explore the different ways in which human trafficking has evolved into a cybercrime. The proposed case study will examine the prevalence of each of the seven CSPs drawn from rational choice theory across five human trafficking cases which all involved the use of the Internet to some degree. Conducting this study will answer the research question of, how has the online environment changed criminal opportunity for human traffickers? I hypothesize that the Internet allows for human traffickers to conduct many of their processes

much easier, quicker, and discreetly. This makes human trafficking easier to do with a lower

likelihood of being caught, since the perpetrator can facilitate a heinous crime while hiding

behind a computer screen. Regarding CSPs, I predict that the Internet increases the number of

targets and accessibility, monetary yield, and expertise, and decreases familiarity, time required,

physical danger, and risk of apprehension. This is because with the dark web especially, there are

so many aspects that make communication, anonymity, untraceable actions, and obfuscations of

data relatively quick and easy to do.

Chapter 5: Proposed Analysis

Since this proposal involves qualitative data, a researcher who is experienced with working with this type of data should conduct this study. The CSPs will be analyzed from the interview transcriptions, and rated on a scale of 0 to100 based on the definitions and assessment aspects described for each CSP in this paper. This method of rating variables is derived from Paletz et al.'s Emotions Annotation Guide for Social Media (2020). 0 indicates that the CSP is not present, 25 indicates that the CSP is present at a low degree, 50 indicates that the CSP is moderately present, 75 indicates that the CSP is present at a high degree, and 100 indicates that the CSP is present at a very high degree. The researcher is not limited to those specific scores (i.e., any number score between 0 and 100 is valid), those numbers are just there to serve as a point of reference. Rating each CSP numerically will allow the researcher to create data visualizations (i.e., line graphs) to showcase trends in the data.

Along with the numerical scores, in-depth data and themes will be discussed in a thematic analysis. This analytic strategy was inspired by a study done on engagement with offenders and attitudes towards them (Boag and Wilson 2013). For this study eight reflexive accounts of people who recently interacted with convicted serious offenders were examined thoroughly by interviewing them about their attitudes before, during, and after the visit. The researchers were then able to thematically analyze these eight reflexive accounts, which shed light on themes of prejudice and empathy towards serious offenders.

For the current study, the thematic analysis will involve reading through the interview transcriptions for each case to see which CSPs are present, their prevalence levels, and how they factored into the crime based on the described definitions and assessment aspects. Then, the CSPs for each case can be compared against each other to identify trends across the five online

human trafficking cases. It is recommended that a CSP comparison table (similar to Table 1) is made to organize the data for each CSP and each case. As trends are identified, the researcher will group similar data together into themes which will then be further discussed in a narrative analysis that uses the CSP data to support the existence of these themes. Conducting this thematic analysis will allow the researcher to generate new insights on human trafficking as a cybercrime from a rational choice theory perspective.

Chapter 6: Discussion

Discussion

      I chose to study human trafficking as a cybercrime because I find both cybercrime and high-profile crimes interesting to read about, so I wanted to turn these two types of crimes into a unique thesis topic. The combination of human trafficking, cybercrime, and rational choice theory all together has not been studied in the way that I propose. I believe studying this topic would lead to useful insight on what makes the Internet a prosperous environment for criminals to operate in, which could then be used to create evidence-based policies and practices that effectively mitigate human trafficking.

Limitations

      There are several limitations for this proposed study. To start off, the sample size only consists of five cases which reduces the reliability of the data since false trends may be identified. Better data could include more cases, so if the researcher is able to fit more cases into the scope of their study, then they should analyze as many as feasible. However, with online human trafficking being an area that so little is known about, diving deep into a set few cases should be prioritized over trying to get a larger sample. Additionally, the sample will only consist of human trafficking cases from Maryland, which may limit generalizability despite the benefits of examining a highly urbanized area. This means that the findings of this study may not accurately reflect the nature of human trafficking as a cybercrime as a whole. Furthermore, the interviews will consist of self-reported data. This opens the possibility for self-desirability bias, the withholding of information, or being simply lied to.

      The data analysis methods of rating CSPs and thematic analysis have their own drawbacks as well. Both methods rely on the discretion and interpretation of the researcher,

which will inherently contain some bias even if the researcher sticks to the CSP definitions and assessment aspects outlined in this paper (Virginia and Clarke 2006). Moreover, since the thematic analysis aims to identify themes across cases, phenomena that only occur in one of the cases looked at may go unnoticed (Virginia and Clarke 2006). To combat this, having a group of researchers analyze the data instead of just one may help to mitigate some of the bias.

Offline human trafficking cases would be a helpful point of comparison for this research study. However, prior research on these types of cases is either not publicly available or it does not exist. On the United States Department of Justice website, public case information on human traffickers is available, but only spans back to 2013. Since then, virtually all the human trafficking cases have involved the use of the Internet to commit the crime. In addition to that, human trafficking as a crime in general is very underground, so gathering data that encapsulates the full scope of how it has evolved into a cybercrime would be extremely difficult if not impossible. Despite this limitation, interviewing human traffickers themselves will help to shed some light on this unknown area of research.

Implications and Future Directions

Conducting this study will greatly contribute to research on human trafficking as a cybercrime since not many studies have been done on this topic, let alone looked at it from a theoretical perspective. The goal of the interviews will be to gain new insight on how human traffickers have been using the Internet to facilitate their crimes and what other factors play a role in them making their decisions. The Internet provides many sources of anonymity for human traffickers to operate with (i.e. the dark web, cryptocurrencies, VPNs, etc.) and the Internet is constantly evolving and changing. Thus, further understanding how offenders currently take advantage of these resources will help law enforcement officials to create policies and methods

27

that will actively mitigate human trafficking online. It will also help criminologists understand what factors make the online environment so optimal and low risk for criminals to operate in, which will then further elucidate the nature of criminal motives.

Ultimately, gaining insight on how human trafficking has become a cybercrime will help the victims. With evidence-based policies and practices in place derived from recent cybercriminal data, it will make human trafficking online much more difficult and riskier for offenders to successfully do. In turn, more human traffickers will be deterred or caught, and less targets will become victims of human trafficking. As technology and cyber-tracing techniques advance, more and more victims will be able to be found and saved before they are sold to buyers on these illicit online markets.

Future research should strive to continue investigating how human traffickers are utilizing the Internet in various ways to conduct their crimes. Conducting this same study every few years would greatly shed light on online human trafficking trends since the online playing field is ever-changing. Additionally, conducting this study with more cases and interviewing human traffickers from different locations would add to the reliability and generalizability of the findings. Multiple iterations of this study throughout time and in different locations would create a large, diverse dataset on online human trafficking cases, which could then be used by criminologists and law practitioners to make proposals for how to successfully mitigate human trafficking. As law enforcement technology and strategies evolve, so do those of criminals. Both parties constantly learn and adapt from each other to catch or avoid one another, so continuing to try and stay up to date on current human trafficking techniques online will aid law enforcement in catching these criminals and saving the victims.

References

Bartsch, Robert. 2019. "The Relationship of Drug and Human Trafficking and their Facilitation Via Cryptomarkets and The Dark Web: A Recommendation For Cryptocurrency Regulation." *Metropolitan State University*.

Becker, Gary S. 1968. "Crime and Punishment: An Economic Approach." *The Journal of Political Economy* 76(2):169-2017.

Boag, Elle M. and David Wilson. 2013. "Does engaging with serious offenders change students' attitude and empathy toward offenders? A thematic analysis." *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry & Psychology* 24(6).

Bouché, Vanessa and Stephanie Shady. 2017. "A Pimp's Game: A Rational Choice Approach to Understanding the Decisions of Sex Traffickers." *Women & Criminal Justice* 27:91-108.

Braun, Virginia and Victoria Clarke. 2006. "Using thematic analysis in psychology." *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3(2):77-101.

Burbano, Danilo and Myriam Hernandez-Alvarez. 2017. "Identifying human trafficking patterns online." *IEEE Second Ecuador Technical Chapters Meeting*.

Cherry, April M. 2018. "Advertising in a world full of human trafficking: How advertising and human trafficking coincide." *Eastern Kentucky University*.

Child Liberation Foundation. 2021. "CHILD TRAFFICKING STATISTICS." Retrieved Dec. 12, 2021 (https://liberatechildren.org/child-trafficking-statistics).

Clarke, Ronald V. and Patricia M. Harris. 1992. "A rational choice perspective on the targets of automobile theft." *Criminal Behavior and Mental Health* 2(1):25-42.

Cornish, Derek B. and Ronald V. Clarke. 1986. "The reasoning criminal: Rational choice

      perspectives on offending." *New York: Springer-Verlag*.

Cornish, Derek B. and Ronald V. Clarke. 1987. "UNDERSTANDING CRIME

      DISPLACEMENT: AN APPLICATION OF RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY."

      Criminology 25(4):933-948.

Dean, Brian. 2021. "Social Network Usage & Growth Statistics: How Many People Use Social

      Media in 2021?" Retrieved Dec. 12, 2021 (https://backlinko.com/social-media-users).

Inter-American Development Bank. 2006. "Human trafficking's dirty profits and huge costs."

      Retrieved Dec. 12, 2021

      (https://www.iadb.org/en/news/human-traffickings-dirty-profits-and-huge-costs).

Johnson, Joseph. 2021. "Global digital population as of January 2021." Retrieved Dec. 12, 2021

      (https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/).

Katti, Sachin, Dina Katabi, and Katarzyna Puchala. 2015. "Slicing the Onion: Anonymous

      Routing Without PKI." *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*.

Lutya, Thozama M. and Mark Lanier. 2012. "An Integrated Theoretical Framework to Describe

      Human Trafficking of Young Women and Girls for Involuntary Prostitution."

Maryland Human Trafficking Task Force. 2022. "Human trafficking in Maryland." Maryland

      Human Trafficking Task Force.

McCluskey, Serena, Joanna Brooks, Nigel King, and Kim Burton. 2011. "The influence of

      'significant others' on persistent back pain and work participation: A qualitative

      exploration of illness perceptions." *BMC Musculoskeletal Disorders*.

Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. 2021."Expertise." Retrieved Dec. 12, 2021

      (https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/expertise).

Oxford Learner's Dictionaries. 2021."Familiarity." Retrieved Dec. 12, 2021

      (https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/familiarity

).

Paletz, Susannah, Ewa Golonka, Grace Stanton, Egle Murauskaite, David C. Ryan, Anton

      Rytting, and Petra Bradley. 2020. "Emotions Annotation Guide for Social Media."

      University of Maryland, Applied Research Laboratory for Intelligence and Security.

Polaris Project. 2021. "Human Trafficking." Retrieved Dec. 12, 2021

      (https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking/).

Rhodes, Leanne M. 2017. "HUMAN TRAFFICKING AS CYBERCRIME." *AGORA*

      International Journal of Administrative Sciences 1:23-29.

United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. 2021. "IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

      ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS: Preliminary findings and messaging based on

      rapid stocktaking." *UNODC*.

United States Department of Justice. 2020. "Beltsville Pimp Sentenced to 25 Years in Federal

      Prison for Sex Trafficking and Narcotics Conspiracies, Witness Tampering, and Related

      Charges." *U.S. Attorney's Office, District of Maryland*.

United States Department of Justice. 2021. "Baltimore Man Sentenced to More Than Four Years

      in Federal Prison for Conspiring to Commit Sex Trafficking of a Minor." U.S.

      Attorney'*s Office, District of Maryland*.

United States Department of Justice. 2021. "Baltimore Sex Trafficker Sentenced to 10 Years in

      Federal Prison for Sex Trafficking Four Minor Victims." U.S. Attorney'*s Office,*

      District of Maryland.

Villota, Marina A. 2019. "The role of technology in human trafficking: exploring the adoption of

    technologies in facilitating and fighting trafficking in Spain."

    Karl-Franzens-Universität Graz.

Weber, Julia and Edwin W. Kruisbergen. 2019. "Criminal markets: the dark web, money

    laundering and counterstrategies - An overview of the 10th Research Conference on

    Organized Crime." *Trends in Organized Crime* 22:346-356.

Weimann, Gabriel. 2016. "Terrorist Migration to the Dark Web." *Terrorism Research Initiative*

    10(3):40-44.