

Human Sex Trafficking: A Thematic Analysis of New York Times Coverage

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Abstract

Probably shocking to many Americans, human sex trafficking is an active and growing industry that happens right at home in the United States. This paper seeks to understand how the American print media reports on the crime of human sex trafficking in published newspaper articles. Understanding how American culture showcases sex slavery in the print media is the first step toward understanding what information is available to the general public about this crime. This study looks at identifying the common themes of human sex trafficking from a national American newspaper, exposing a small-scale understanding of how the print media represents modern-day slavery to the American public. A thematic analysis was used to uncover the emergent themes of 32 articles from the third highest circulated newspaper in the United States, the New York Times. Using this qualitative method, the first research question—which asked specifically what content the articles were expressing about human sex trafficking in the United States—uncovered three major themes with seven sub-themes. Agenda-setting theory served as the foundational theory to explain how the public interprets the voice of print media, how they adapt those opinions with their own, and why dependence on the news is crucial for issue awareness.

Probably shocking to many Americans, human sex trafficking is an active and growing industry that happens right at home in the United States. In fact, according to a Department of State report, the United States has become the second most trafficked country in the world (“Trafficking in Persons,” 2007). For the pimps, sex slavery is a lucrative business that involves the coercion of mostly vulnerable American and foreign girls. The U.S. Department of Justice reported in 2005 that there were an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 sex slaves as young as five years old in the United States (“Trafficking in Persons,” 2007). In 2012, human sex trafficking was a \$32 billion dollar industry in the United States (“Time to tackle,” 2012, February 12). Beyond the sheer magnitude of this issue, the real travesty is why the American media is not placing a spotlight on why it has become desirable to exploit minors for their bodies.

The purpose of this paper is to understand how the American media, specifically the print media, is reporting on the crime of human sex trafficking in published newspaper articles. Understanding how American culture is showcasing sex slavery in the print media is the first step toward understanding what information is available to the general public about this crime. This study looks at identifying the common themes of human sex trafficking from a national American newspaper, exposing a small-scale understanding of how the print media is representing the issue of modern-day slavery to the American public. A thematic analysis was used to uncover the emergent themes of 32 articles from the third highest circulated newspaper in the United States, *The New York Times*. Using this qualitative method, three major themes emerged with seven sub-themes from the first research question, which asked specifically what content the articles were expressing about human sex trafficking in the United States. Agenda-setting theory served as the foundational theory to explain how the public interprets the voice of print media, how they adapt those opinions with their own, and why dependence on the news is crucial for issue awareness.

Literature Review

What is Sex Trafficking?

Modern-day slavery is a billion dollar industry that forcibly claims the lives of mostly young adolescents who find themselves captured in brutal confinement without any hope of escape. The Supreme Court of the United States groups human trafficking into two categories: sex trafficking and labor trafficking (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009). This paper focuses exclusively on human sex trafficking. Wholly defined, human sex trafficking is the “action of forcing, coercing, or deceiving an individual

into prostitution through the means of recruiting, transporting, or harboring that person for the goal of involuntary servitude, exploitation, debt bondage, or slavery” (Aronowitz, 2009, p. 1; “Fact Sheet,” 2007).

Human sex trafficking is the most common form of modern-day slavery, amounting to the fastest growing business of organized crime and the third largest criminal enterprise in the world (Hill & Rodriguez, 2011). Sex trafficking crimes include prostitution, pornography, stripping, live-sex shows, mail-order brides, military prostitution, and sex tourism (Clawson et al., 2009).

Of all the trafficked victims in the world moved across borders, 70% are female and 50% are children (Sabyan, Smith, & Tanneeru, 2011). It is estimated that 199,000 incidents of sexual exploitation of minors occur annually in the United States (Clawson et al., 2009). In 2012, a federal anti-trafficking task force created by the U.S. Department of Justice found that 82% of the 2,515 suspected incidents were classified as sex trafficking (U.S. Human, 2012). Of those cases, more than half of the victims were minors, and 83% were United States citizens (U.S. Human, 2012). Further research indicates that most victims of sex trafficking into and within the United States are women and children, particularly girls under the age of 18 (Richard, 1999). The U.S. State Department estimates approximately half of the 600,000 to 800,000 victims transported across borders worldwide are minors (U.S. Human, 2007).

Despite the number of cases found, it is difficult to estimate fully the number of victims in the United States. First, human trafficking is a covert crime, making gathering statistics on the nature, prevalence, and geography of human trafficking difficult to assess (Clawson, Layner, & Small, 2006; Clawson et al., 2009). Secondly, victims are often hidden by a lack of immigration documents or in private businesses that act as a façade for trafficking operations (Clawson et al., 2006). Lastly, victims are closely guarded by their captors, making victims difficult to identify (Clawson et al., 2006).

Domestic Versus Foreign Sex Trafficking

Sex trafficking victims in the United States can be classified into two categories: domestic (U.S. citizens) or foreign (individuals brought to the United States for the purpose of being traded in the sex industry).

Domestic trafficking. To be classified as modern day slavery, victims of sex trafficking do not have to be transported across country borders as some may believe (Clawson et al., 2009). Another misconception about sex trafficking is that girls are the only victims in this crime, but boys are also trafficked inside their own countries. Domestic sex trafficking refers

specifically to the recruitment and transportation of children within their home country through deception or coercion for the purpose of commercial sex exploitation (Estes & Weiner, 2001). The majority of American sex trafficking victims are either runaways or thrown-away youths who live on the streets and whose life experiences involve abusive homes or families (Hill & Rodriguez, 2011). Since runaways have little or no way to support themselves, many get involved in prostitution for financial support and to get drugs or other possessions they need or desire (Hill & Rodriguez, 2011).

Foreign trafficking. Domestic trafficking involves victims already in the target country; alternatively, foreign trafficking involves transporting the victims across international borders. Trafficking women and children for the sex industry is rampant in every region of the United States (Richard, 1999). The average age of women trafficked into the United States is twenty, but many of them have been forced into slavery at a younger age (Richard, 1999). In 2009, the U.S. government and nongovernmental experts in the field estimated that, out of the 700,000 to 2 million women and children trafficked globally each year, approximately 50,000 of those women and children are trafficked to the United States (Richard, 1999). Many of these women transported to the United States are smuggled in the country by small crime rings and loosely connected criminal networks (Richard, 1999). Research has shown that most of these women are from Thailand, Vietnam, China, Mexico, Russia, Ukraine, and the Czech Republic (Richard, 1999). Other targeted trafficked countries are the Philippines, Korea, Malaysia, Poland, Brazil, and Honduras (Richard, 1999). These women are predominantly forced into prostitution via stripping, peep and touch shows, or massage parlors that offer sexual services (Richard, 1999).

The Victims

Stereotypes of young innocent foreign girls seduced or kidnapped from their home countries and forced into prostitution do not accurately depict the demographics of all victims. Men, women, and children of all ages and nationalities are trafficked for sex purposes regardless of whether they are trafficked into the United States or are citizens exploited in their own country (Florida University, 2003). Although people from every race and ethnicity are victims of sex trafficking, the majority of adolescents arrested for prostitution are African-American girls (Clawson et al., 2009; Flowers, 2001). Despite this divide, victims of sex trafficking have vulnerabilities in common that surface across categories of sex, age, immigration status, or

citizenship (Protection Project, 2002). Poverty, youth, limited education, limited work opportunities, lack of family (homeless, throw-away, run-aways), history of sexual abuse, health or mental challenges, and areas with high crime or police corruption are all risk factors or characteristics that attract traffickers looking for victims (Salvation Army, 2006).

Impoverished women and children with a lack of options constitute a large portion of victims. International victims may be trying to escape economic and political crises or unsatisfactory living conditions (Aiko, 2002). In poor economic times, traffickers prey on struggling individuals (Aronowitz, 2009). The correlation between poverty and sex slavery is strong because low-income girls find it harder to escape the life of a prostitute (Lloyd, 2005).

Girls who were sexually abused in the past are also prey to sex trafficking. In a study by Clawson et al., (2009), of a sample of 106 adult women incarcerated for prostitution-related offenses, 68 percent reported that they had been sexually abused before the age of 10 and half reported having been raped at a younger age. Research demonstrates that the younger a girl is when she enters prostitution, the greater the likelihood of prior sexual abuse (Clawson et al., 2009). There are also studies that show a correlation between prostituted girls and family disruption. Girls who come from families where addiction is present, and/or if their mothers were physically abused by an intimate partner, are more likely to be involved in prostitution (Clawson et al., 2009).

Furthermore, the death of a parent, a divorce, or abandonment can put a youth at risk for exploitation (Clawson et al., 2009). The sense of loneliness and isolation that can occur from being placed in a foster home or in the child welfare system can make them vulnerable (Rabinovitch, 2003).

Boys are not as visible as young girls in the crime of sex trafficking (McKnight, 2006). The likelihood of boys leaving their homes feeling unwanted or misunderstood is more likely than girls, but often their involvement in prostitution stems from a similar history, such as past abuse and dysfunctional homes (Flowers, 1998). "Boys primarily sell their bodies to survive financially, explore their sexuality, and/or to make contact with gay men" (Flowers, 1998, p. 141). One study found that two-thirds of prostituted males had run away from home before being involved in the sex industry, and 40-50% were thrown out of their homes because of sexual identity issues (Clawson et al., 2009). Approximately 25-35% of boys involved in prostitution self-identify as gay, bisexual, or transgender/transsexual (Estes & Weinter, 2001). No matter their self-identification, 95% of clientele for prostituted boys are adult men (Estes & Weinter, 2001).

Pimp or Trafficker

The terms “pimp” and “trafficker” can easily be assumed to be synonymous; however, there is a distinction between these two roles (“Domestic Human,” 2008). Depending on the jurisdiction, a pimp may not be violating any laws if he does not force another person to stay with him for the purposes of exploitation because the arrangement is for him to find and manage clients for her (“Domestic Human,” 2008). Although a pimp does earn profit from a prostitute’s earnings, according to law it is not considered force, fraud, or coercion to oblige adult women to prostitute themselves (“Domestic Human,” 2008). However, any pimp who knowingly manages a minor would be classified as a trafficker (“Domestic Human,” 2008). Similar to a pimp, a trafficker also consciously profits from prostitution, except that the victim has been coerced (“Domestic Human,” 2008). It does not matter if he is directly or indirectly involved in the management of victims (“Domestic Human,” 2008). Although most traffickers are men, there is also a fraction of female sex traffickers (Estes & Weiner, 2001).

Many pimps will have house rules about how to speak to traffickers, authorities, and johns or customers (“Domestic Human,” 2008). Victims have reported that extreme sexual and/or physical violence occurs if any of the rules are broken (“Domestic Human,” 2008). Some victims are forced to commit other criminal acts or to recruit other victims (“Domestic Human,” 2008). One common house rule is the nightly quota, which requires the girls to make a certain amount of earnings every evening. The quotas typically range from \$500 to \$1,000 each night for commercial sex (Polaris Project). The women have to meet their quota through whatever means necessary or they will not be allowed to eat or sleep until the quota has been reached (“Sex Trafficking,” 2012). Quotas are strictly enforced through punishment in the form of physical torture (“Sex Trafficking,” 2012). To add to the injustice, the girls rarely get to keep any of the money because it all is given to the trafficker (“Sex Trafficking,” 2012). A nonprofit based out of Washington D.C., the Polaris Project, made an informal estimate of a pimp’s annual income from prostituting four women in his control (the average number of women and girls a pimp will control) based on direct client accounts. Between these four women, the pimp would make \$632,000 in a year if each woman made approximately \$500-1,000 per night, seven days a week (“Sex Trafficking,” 2012).

These pimps have created a separate subculture to imprison their victims, but most traffickers grow up not far away from the crime itself. A study of twenty-five ex-pimps discovered that 88% of them were physically

abused as a child and 76% were victims of sexual abuse themselves (Myers-Powell & Raphael, 2010). The same study uncovered that 88% of these traffickers grew up in domestic violence households and witnessed substance abuse in their home as a child. To illustrate this further, one female pimp argued that sexual violation against women is a fact of life and can be used to benefit the women (Myers-Powell & Raphael, 2010).

The Johns

Human sex trafficking does not only involve the victim and the trafficker; in fact, without a demand from “johns” or clients, there would be no need for modern-day slavery. In a study by Raphael and Myers-Powell (2010), one pimp described the surplus of johns as if they were falling out of trees. It may be assumed that the clients of sex trafficking are low-income men with social or psychological issues, but the reality is that “johns” are average, respected Americans with regular jobs, who tend to view women as commodities (Malarek, 2009). Victor Malarek (2009), author of *The Johns: Sex for Sale and the Men Who Buy It*, has written that johns “remain on the sidelines while the women provide the public face of prostitution” (p. 13). In fact, there is little research on “johns” other than a handful of demographic studies on age, marital status, education, salary, and employment, all of which could fit into a briefcase when compared to the small library that could be filled with research on prostituted women (Malarek, 2009). These men are stockbrokers, musicians, politicians, lawyers, writers, hotel bellmen, cab drivers, and bartenders, along with other professionals (Malarek, 2009).

Research which interviewed former pimps indicated that wealthy Caucasian and Asian men are the main clients, but African-American men were rare unless also professional athletes (Raphael & Myers-Powell, 2010). Prostitution allows Caucasian and Asian men to live out their fantasy of having sex with an African-American woman (Malarek, 2009). These pimps also told of “snooty” college kids with money being common customers; some even came with their fathers (Malarak, 2009). For some johns, buying sex is more of a hobby, although not one they easily brag about or are proud of, although many would argue it is “perfectly natural” (Malarak, 2009).

Farley did a study in 2011 with 202 men from Boston, which serves as a small representative sample of sex buyers and non-sex buyers. This study showed that the average age of sex buyers was 41, with the range being between 20 to 70 years old. Fifty-six percent of these men were Caucasian, 23% African American, and 89% of these men identified as heterosexual.

The average age when most of these men bought sex for the first time was 21, and these men paid for sexual services an average of 54 times in their lifetime. Eighty-eight percent of these occasions began at a bar, strip club, private party, or hotel. Out of this sample, 50% of sex buyers selected women based on ethnicity, and 80% also chose women based on their age (Farley, 2011). Some research found that the johns who revisit brothels choose children from the age of 12 to 17 as their preferred age group (“Slavery,” 2012). The johns refuse to identify the children as victims of sexual exploitation (“Slavery,” 2012). In one study, a pimp who managed a brothel informed researchers that repeat customers want new faces, therefore he had to “clean house” every six weeks (Myers-Powell & Raphael, 2010).

Outside of finding girls in person, clients use public announcements to find girls and women “willing” to sell their bodies. Internet advertisements have become a huge resource for pimps and traffickers to advertise their girls (Farley, 2011). Johns are referred by bartenders and hotel bell men, but mostly cab drivers (Myers-Powell and Raphael, 2010). Different interviews with pimps said that bachelor parties were consistent opportunities to attract at least two or three regular clients (Myers-Powell & Raphael, 2010). The Yellow Pages telephone book lists numbers for massage parlors and escort services, which can be façades for sex trafficking (Clawson et al., 2009). Newspapers, tabloids, and free advertising in adult bookstores boast about different ethnicities, nationalities, and races (Clawson et al., 2009). There are also a number of online forums for men to share experiences and to share information on establishments with prostitutes (Clawson et al., 2009).

While most johns do not like to think of their “date” as a sex slave, they are creating a demand for more girls and more illegal activity of prostitution (“Slavery,” 2012). Johns see prostitution as consensual and/or an economic choice for the woman (Farley, 2011). Johns prefer to view prostitutes as loving sex (Farley, 2011). Contrary to this belief, victims of sex slavery often suffer from psychological illnesses that can cause them to shut down mentally in preparation for having sex with ten strangers or more a day (Farley, 2011). These illnesses can manifest even greater the longer they stay in the industry (Farley, 2011). Additionally, most women just as if they enjoy sex as an act for the client (Farley, 2011).

Media Effects on the Public

Whether the effects of media are intended or by accident, media channels do have a platform to influence its audience. Some intended effects

may include: public service announcements on personal behavior and social improvements, effects on propaganda or ideology, and effects of virtual media on social control (McGuire, 1986). However, according to McGuire (1986), there are a substantial number of effects that the media does not intend on making. These include effects of media reportage of violence on aggressive behavior, the impact of media images on the social construction of reality, effects of media bias on stereotyping, effects of erotic and sexual material on attitudes and objectionable behavior, and how media forms affect cognitive activity and style (McGuire, 1986). Further research has blamed mainstream media for knowledge gain and distribution through society, the socialization into social norms, and cultural adaptations and changes (Perse, 2001). There are disagreements on how much media affects its audience; however, no matter the degree of emphasis, there is a consensus that media does have some impact on social life and structure (Perse, 2001).

According to Perse (2001), there are three learning curves associated with media effects: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. First, cognitive effects refer to what is learned and how much is learned. Second, affective effects contribute to the audience's positive or negative attitude or evaluation of a particular topic which evokes emotion within a media context. Last, audiences exposed to media begin to behave according to the media exposure, which is labeled as behavioral effects. The idea that people have the willingness to let the media shape their views is referred to as the index of curiosity (Bittner, 2006).

Agenda-setting theory. The reality of our culture is that there is a surplus of information from various media channels. Journalism professors Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw believe that "mass media have the ability to transfer the salience of items on news agendas to the public agenda" (McCombs, 2004, p. 177). Their theory of agenda-setting says that the media influences the public with salient cues in deciding which topics are the most important to consider (Bittner, 1996). This view does not suggest that broadcast and print personnel intentionally try to influence their readers, listeners, or viewers (Bittner, 1996). Nevertheless, McCombs and Shaw claim that the public looks to news professionals for cues on where to focus their attention on what is important (Bittner, 1996). "The press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about," said Bernard Cohen, University of Wisconsin political scientist (as cited in McCombs & Shaw, 1972, p. 177).

I used the agenda-setting theory to analyze my data to understand

which themes of sex trafficking *The New York Times* has made more salient. By identifying which concepts involving sex trafficking in the United States are expressed as more important in the articles, I was able to conclude how this affects how the readers view each item and therefore rank it in importance. Through an agenda-setting theory lens, article placement is a large factor in suggesting to the reader which stories are most important. McCombs and Shaw reasoned that people who read the newspaper recognize that editors place greater stress on the front page than the shorter articles hidden in the other pages (Bittner, 2006). Another example is when a newspaper or other news source puts greater emphasis on certain stories. These become the issues that the public gravitates to as most important, which consequently influences the way people think (Bittner, 2006). The mindset is, "If the news editors of *Time* and ABC think it is important, I probably will too" (Bittner, 2006, p. 363). This attention is further exploited by the news source. Top representatives of the Associated Press, like *The New York Times*, become the agenda setter for other news sources, again keeping the top issues in the frontline (Bittner, 2006). This can keep the public narrow-minded, especially because these media conglomerates are mostly composed of Caucasian males who follow the same social circles, parties, and conferences, resulting in a misrepresentation of U.S. citizens (Bittner, 2006).

Research Question: What themes were written about in regard to sex slavery in *The New York Times*?

Methods

Data Collection

Sample. The criteria for article selection mandated that each article chosen for this study 1) be related to the subject of human sex trafficking in the United States and 2) had been published from January 2011 through June 2012 in *The New York Times*. These dates were chosen in order to acquire the most recent sample of articles, and the dates provided the researcher with a broader understanding of how sex trafficking has been represented over an 18 month period. I chose *The New York Times* because it is the third most widely circulated American newspaper in the United States (Audit Bureau of Circulation, 2012). Initially, it was suggested to use three newspapers, including *USA Today* (which is second on the list) and the *Wall Street Journal* (which is ranked first); however, after some preliminary research on each newspaper's website, *The New York Times* offered the most variety and material for data analysis. In addition,

after only finding less than five articles relating to human sex trafficking in the previously suggested newspapers, the decision was made to focus solely on the articles from *The New York Times*, which provided a more accurate collection of data than other online national newspaper archives; the lack of articles found under other sources did not effectively represent enough range to be evaluated for educational data.

Criterion sampling was the major sampling technique used to identify relevant articles to examine. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), criterion sampling is used when the research decides on specific criteria that will be used to choose the sample that will be examined. In this study, criteria for the articles had to be related to (1) human sex trafficking (and not any other form of modern-day slavery); (2) the articles could not be focused on celebrity involvement in awareness because these articles did not provide substantial evidence based on the research questions; and (3) the articles had to be directly related to sex trafficking in the United States.

Identifying the articles involved visiting the *New York Times* website and using the search bar to search “Human Sex Trafficking.” Once directed to the archive page, I narrowed the search further by putting in the dates “January 1st, 2011” to “June 30, 2012.” From this search, 2,200 results were found to have some connection with the dates and the search words. The articles were placed in order of relevance for the search phrase “human sex trafficking.” From this step, I found 60 articles that varied from topics on celebrity sex scandals and foreign sex trafficking to other items not directly related to the discussion of human sex trafficking in the United States. Although over 2,000 hits were identified, after reviewing articles on the first ten pages of the website search, the articles shifted focus on either “humans,” “sex,” or “trafficking” and no longer focused on human sex trafficking as an organized crime. Therefore, from the sample, 32 articles were identified as relevant to the topic of “human sex trafficking in the United States,” excluding any articles involving celebrity advocates or sex offenders.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis. I examined 32 articles from the nationally acclaimed newspaper *The New York Times*. A thematic analysis was conducted that identified themes common to each article. To find themes in these articles, I read each article holistically, jotting down notes and numbering each potential themes. Then I read the articles a second time, looking for common themes throughout. In qualitative research, it is common to realize that not all of the material found in the reading process will be used

as data because it will not contribute to the research objectives. With this understanding, data reduction, or prioritizing emerging themes, were “reduced” into categories and codes to create a manageable number of emergent themes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Therefore, on the last review of the 32 articles, I was able to distinguish the emergent themes from the articles. It was important while reviewing the data collected that I re-read my research question to keep the evidence relevant to the focus of this study. After identifying the emergent themes based on my reading, it was easy to see which potential themes stood out and were more prevalent or common. From my findings, I determined how the print media is representing sex slavery to its readers.

Validation Strategies

Due to my own personal opinions and biases of this particular cultural issue, I applied two validation strategies. First, I identified and clarified my bias of this topic. I have strong opinions against the use of power or manipulation to force another human to commit sexual acts without consent, especially when the victim is viewed as an object or attraction.

The second validation strategy used was rich, thick description. These direct quotes from the newspaper articles are used so the researcher can decide if the data are transferable to other print media (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In the results section of this report, I used direct quotes from the newspaper articles to highlight emergent themes that connected the various articles. Using rich, thick quotes allows the reader to judge the data with his or her own perspective.

Results

The research questions guiding this analysis focused on how *The New York Times* articles from January 1, 2011 to June 30, 2012 have been communicating the issues of human sex trafficking to its readers. The first research question focused on themes that emerged in the articles about sex slavery in *The New York Times*. Three themes were found: the victims’ demographics, pimping tactics, and the online sex market. Within these themes, several subthemes were discovered as a result of an analysis of the 32 articles.

Victims’ Demographics

Young girls. The most frequent subtheme found in these 32 articles of *The New York Times* was the prevalence of underage girl victims either rescued from or who escaped from the industry. From the articles, the

youngest girl interviewed said she was nine when she started being sold for sex. Along with her, girls as young as 10 and 12 (and up to 17) testified as having been approached by a pimp. The articles reported two different claims: the average age for girls to be forced into prostitution is 12 to 14, and the most vulnerable ages range from 16 to 18. Another article stated that half of these young sex-slaved minors still live with their parents. Young girls are most desirable in the sex-trade because of their “tween” bodies (Kitroeff, 2012, para. 3).

Race and family background. The backgrounds for many of the victims recorded in these articles reveal that the majority grew up in abusive homes. For example, one article stated that a victim’s father beat her when she was a young child (Brown, 2011, para. 3). Another victim said her stepfather would take her to an abandoned building to touch her inappropriately when she was twelve. One victim, Withelma Ortiz, grew up in the foster system with families that would sexually and psychologically abuse her (Kitroeff, 2012). Another victim, Lisa, recounts that for ten years her father would rape her, starting when she was four years old. He would also invite other men to join in the abuse after she turned 18. Lisa’s story began before birth. Her mother was an alcoholic, which resulted in Lisa being born with fetal alcohol syndrome, which affects a person developmentally, leading to difficulty in paying attention, speaking, and possessing a poor memory (Kristof, 2012, para. 3-4).

One article claimed that the typical victim is usually a “13-year-old girl of color from a troubled home who is on bad terms with her mother” (Kristof, 2011, para. 13). This was the case for Brianna. At age 12, she ran away from home for the night because of a fight with her mother. She never intended to be gone more than a night, but after confiding in a friend’s older brother, she was forced into the sex trade. Runaways are a big target for pimps. One victim, Baby Face, was found by her pimp after she had run away from home (Kristof, January 2012, para. 19). Her pimp provided her with human essentials for survival and, a few days later, she was being advertised online.

Pimping Tactics

First meeting. For the girls that find themselves enslaved in the sex industry, most are coerced by an “idealistic” man. This overpowering system involves an older man approaching the victim and telling her that she is attractive or beautiful and then asking her to be his girlfriend. For these girls who “lack self-esteem and lack alternatives” (Kristof, 2011, para. 6), they are flattered and agree because of his promise for “a better life”

(Walter, 2012, para 3). For the minors or runaways that have no means for providing for themselves, the pimps promise to feed, clothe, and take care of them when they are sick. For other victims, perhaps their pimp bought them food and, because she was “boy crazy” and desperate to have a man her in life, she viewed him as a boyfriend that would always have her best interests in mind (Kitroeff, 2012, para. 9). It is not an accident that these men approach these girls. Many of them could be stalking a girl for days to see if she is vulnerable. Traffickers are ready to exploit these girls mentally, emotionally, and physically (Kitroeff, 2012, para. 11). For other victims, kidnapping is the gateway into the trade. “You can be kidnapped just walking down the street,” said one victim. “It’s ‘hey girl,’ and the next thing you know you’re kicking him or some other girl will talk to you and then snatch you up,” she said (Brown, 2011, para. 19, 20).

Violence and threats. Violence is a common theme in these articles for how pimps treat their victims. The girls are often locked in a room, tied up, drugged, raped, and threatened. Beatings, rape, and drugging are typical tactics for pimps to inflict on victims in the beginning of their relationship. One pimp would beat his prostitutes with a studded belt, his fists, a hammer, or a heel of a shoe (Kristof, 2012, para. 19). Pimps will use threats, intimidation, and beatings to force the girls to have sex for money with clients. Prostitutes live in fear of their pimp, which helps explain why these girls do not try to escape. One victim was kicked down a stairwell because she tried to run. Another survivor retold the memory of her pimp hitting her over the head with a glass bottle for trying to call 911 (Kristof, January 2012, para. 3). A similar attempt for escape resulted in one girl almost being killed. “I got drowned. He choked me, put me in the tub, and when I woke up, I was drowning. He said he’d kill me if I left” (Kristof, 2012, para. 15). A young girl once saw her mother outside the window hanging up search flyers for her return. The girl tried to yell for her mother’s attention, but the pimp grabbed her back viciously and threatened to kill her if she shouted (Kristof, 2012, para. 15). Forms of this violence are also inflicted on the victims as a consequence for not meeting the pimp’s quota for the night or for being caught by police. Alyssa said that, if she did not meet the quota or if she tried to connect with the outside world, the pimp “would get aggressive and strangle me and physically assault me and threaten to sell me to someone that was more violent than him, which he eventually did” (Kristof, March 2012, para 13).

Pimps also have been known to brand their victims. Several articles said that pimps would tattoo their names or a barcode on the girls to illustrate that she was property and for sale. Allegedly one pimp branded his

victim with a tattoo of a dollar sign in her pubic area (Kristof, May 2012, para. 3). Still, needles are not always the tools used by pimps. One survivor has a scar on her face from when her pimp gouged her with a potato peeler. "He wanted to brand me in a way I would never forget," she said (Kristof, March 2012, para. 2). Another victim had her pimp's name carved into her back with a safety pin.

Stockholm syndrome. As stated earlier, the majority of the victims in these articles reportedly came from broken families, which resulted in them having low self-esteem and a desperate desire for affection. The pimps will use a web of deceit emotionally to capture the girls' affection, which results in a Stockholm syndrome effect for the majority of these girls. The pimps prey on vulnerable girls and women that they can degrade by using a combination of violence and tenderness to coerce them under their control. Many victims feel a romantic bond with their pimps, even if he beats them. One victim said that even though he beat her maliciously, he would then beg for forgiveness. Being beaten was not a new experience for her, but the expression of remorse differed from her past. "Somebody finally beat the crap out of you and then comes back and kisses it and says, 'I want to make it better'" (Kitroeff, 2012, para. 3). For her, the sign of regret was love.

This emotional bond becomes particularly destructive when the victim needs to testify in court. Advocates against human sex trafficking blame the psychological and emotional difficulties as reasons why many victims refuse or retract any accusations against the pimps that sell their bodies. For girls and women raised in unsafe and unloving environments, this dependency runs particularly deep. For girls who have never really felt valued, it is even harder to speak out against perhaps the only person to ever show them love (Kitroeff, 2012, para. 10).

One victim was asked to testify against her pimp after five years of enslavement by him; however, because she was still afraid that he could hurt her, even after he was in custody, she chose not to make a claim. She regrets the decision deeply and blames her decision on Stockholm syndrome (Kitroeff, 2012, para. 4). For those victims subjected to violence and prostitution at a young age, the slave-life seems normal. One victim told reporters that she loved her pimp very much and thought the relationship normal.

It is difficult to find victims who will testify in court or who will try to escape because they are either paralyzed by fear or have Stockholm syndrome. Norma Ramos, executive director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, says that one "thing we've learned from women who

have been prostituted is that it is very easy to get into, but very difficult to get out of” (Buettner, 2012, para. 11).

Online Sex Trade

The online sex trade completes the analysis of the emergent themes found under the first research question for discovering what *The New York Times* articles were saying about human sex trafficking. The internet has become a booming resource for pimps to advertise victims and for johns to find girls. Ironically, the same websites that sell and advertise sex with victims also provides law enforcement an easy access into the trade market for the purpose of rescuing these girls and arresting traffickers. First is an explanation of how pimps and johns use this technology to further advance the industry.

Helping johns and pimps. The researched articles found that most pimps are looking at online websites to advertise and sell their prostitutes. “Pimps are turning to the Internet,” said Lauren Hersh, ace prosecutor in Brooklyn who leads the sex-trafficking unit (Walter, 2012, 10). Other enforcement officers and child advocates agree that American-born minors being lured into the sex trade has exploded with the internet. Pimps will post ads with naked pictures of the girls, marketed on the websites where the clients with more time and money will browse (Baker & Stelloh, 2012, para. 5). These advertisements can be found under section labels such as “adult,” “escort,” or “strippers and strip clubs” (Carr, 2011, para. 3). Despite nationwide campaigns and pressure from government leaders for these sites to ban sex-related advertisements, the online sex trade is flourishing.

The largest forum for the online sex trade is Backpage.com. This website is mentioned in every article reviewed for the current study about human sex trafficking online sales. This website accounts for about 70% of America’s prostitution ads, which estimates to \$22 million in annual sales from these ads (Kristof, April 2012, para. 9; Kristof, March 2012, para. 5). The articles recognize that some of these ads are made by consensual adults. A sixteen-year-old former victim said that three quarters of her “dates” came from Backpage (Kristof, March 2012, 15). Backpage representatives say that they have spent millions of dollars working with law enforcement to monitor these advertisements to screen ads that feature minors. “For a website like Backpage to make \$22 million off our backs,” said former victim, “it’s like going back to slave times” (Kristof, March 2012, para. 18).

Backpage.com is not the only site subject to being infiltrated by sex traffickers. In fact, one site, itspimpin101.net, provides a forum for com-

munity sharing for johns, prostitutes, and pimps. The site provides visitors with instructional podcasts for pimps or aspiring pimps. There are tips and advice about “the game,” and users make deals and share police sighting in real-time (Walter, 2012, para. 5). This site and other similar sites provide individuals an opportunity to speak out against pimps, prostitutes, or customers that have robbed or ripped them off.

Helping police. There is some debate in the articles reviewed on whether online forums are igniting the industry or providing an easier method for law enforcement to rescue victims. Law enforcement officials agree that online communities have made solicitation easier; however, it has also given police a new insight into the hidden trade. In 2010, when Craigslist’s “erotic services” was removed, it took away the “fish pond,” which Detective Jeremy Martinez of the San Jose Police Human Trafficking Task Force called a “great tool” for law enforcement to gather intelligence (Walter, 2012, para. 6, 7). The Alameda County district attorney’s human trafficking unit supervisor, Casey Bates, says that online sex sites are a “love-hate-relationship” and “maybe the best thing to do is to block a site or take it down, but it just pops up in a different form” (Walter, 2012, para. 20). In fact, the side that does not believe battling the different websites will change the crime claims that \$44 million of the sex-related advertisements that were on Craigslist have now relocated to Backpage.com. Supporting this argument, some advocates believe that instead of spending money on banning advertisements, money should be spent on the root causes of human trafficking: drug addiction, poverty, and family abuse (Carr, 2011, para. 16). On the other side, opponents against online communities argue that when Craigslist stopped advertisements in 2010, the online prostitution plummeted more than 50 percent. They claim that getting Backpage.com to exit the sex trade advertisements would be a setback for pimps, losing a major online market, though it would not solve the problem (Kristof, 2012, para. 9).

In conclusion, the three major themes that emerged from the 32 articles from *The New York Times* for the first research question were the victims’ demographics, the tactics of pimps, and the increasing online sex trade. Each of these themes generated its own subthemes, which increased the readers’ understanding of how to categorize the information said about human sex trafficking in the United States.

Discussion

As stated previously, under agenda-setting theory, the media has an impact on its readers and viewers. The human sex trafficking articles

reported in *The New York Times* portrayed a basic understanding of the issue constructed from testimonies from former sex slave victims, personal opinions of the authors, and police reports. The salience of these themes determines how the readers prioritize the central factors of this social issue, which corresponds with their personal convictions toward this human injustice. This study reviewed articles that dealt with the issue of human sex trafficking in the United States; however, as agenda-setting theory suggests, the tragedy is that only a handful of articles singled out this issue. How can the American public fully understand this issue when only 32 articles in a timeframe of a year and half were published? Unfortunately, the placement of these articles in the print form of the newspaper (one factor in agenda-setting theory) is unclear, having been found while archived online.

The research question focused on what themes were expressed in the 32 newspaper articles from *The New York Times*. In order to make conclusions about what the articles say about sex trafficking, it is crucial to compare the emergent themes with the academic research already found about sex trafficking. The congruent themes found in the literature review and the articles included the demographics of the victims, the cycle of coercion used by traffickers, and the psychological difficulties for the victims.

The articles studied frequently referenced the ages and family backgrounds of the girls being trafficked for sex. Similar to prior research, the average age for these girls ranged from twelve to fourteen (e.g. Brown, 2011; Moynihan, 2012). The testimonies from the former victims in the newspaper articles consistently told of girls who had run away from home or had a history of physical or sexual abuse from their relatives. These “throw away” youths are finding their needs met by a trafficker who promises to give them a better life.

As the literature claims (“Sex Trafficking,” 2012), the victim’s stories told of how these traffickers would pose as caring older men and propose to be their “boyfriend.” Whether through force or emotional confinement, these traffickers quickly turn these girls into profit. For these girls, many of whom have come from emotionally deprived home lives, this expression of love and hope begins the cycle of abuse that ultimately traps them into a life of slavery.

Victor Malarek (2009), author of “The Johns: Sex for sale and the men who buy it,” writes that these men are often overlooked in the media because there is an underlying cultural belief that “prostitution is an acceptable outlet for men’s urge” because “men need sex, as the belief goes, to feel like real men, to amuse themselves, let off steam, or as a diversion from the

cares of life” (p. 15). The combination of the cultural acceptance that “boys will be boys” and the lie that prostitutes choose that lifestyle has created a social injustice that is impersonal to the public.

As explained extensively in the articles, the girls are often too afraid to stand up against their trafficker because they live in fear of their pimps. Victims live in a desperate and continuous cycle of being forced to perform sexual acts with various men until late in the morning, only to sleep or mentally prepare during the day for the next night. They have no say on whether they keep the money or whether or not they want to prostitute themselves. The option of refusing comes with the reality of knowing that it will result in malicious violence and potentially death.

The reality for these victims is that they have to forgo their freedom either by fear or by an emotional affection for their trafficker. Stockholm syndrome is present and unifying in these cases of sex trafficking victims. Vulnerabilities are exploited as the captives of sex trafficking are removed from any emotional state of safety. Victims are physically and emotionally overpowered, making them incapable of escape even if they had an opportunity.

Conclusion

The issue of sex slavery is a problem that is happening right now. This issue is American. It is hurting citizens, minors, girls, boys, and families. It is a personal issue, and should be presented as such. Whether citizens feel the need to become actively involved or not in rescuing these girls, the public should be informed about the whole issue so it becomes a choice to act, not an issue of naivety. From this current study, the public that has read all of the articles relating to human sex trafficking from January 1, 2011 to June 30, 2012, in *The New York Times* became predominately aware of the sex slavery victims’ demographics, the use of the internet to trade sex for money, and the cycle of coercion and abuse traffickers use to instill fear in minors. However, these readers were not given insight into the johns that have an extensive role in the trafficking minors for sex, the background of pimps, and the reader’s own role in stopping this injustice. Human sex trafficking is alive and thriving, and the longer we ignore the issue or do not admit to the realities, more victims are being beaten, manipulated, and turned into an object for pleasure, instead of individuals as human as the un-slaved.

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