

**Unveiling the Complexities of Human Trafficking: Exploring Motivations and  
Cybersecurity Challenges through an interdisciplinary lens**

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### **Abstract**

Human trafficking, a multifaceted form of exploitation, presents frightening challenges to societies globally. While financial gain is a central motivation for human traffickers, their actions are influenced by diverse factors extending beyond economic incentives. This paper employs an interdisciplinary approach drawing from criminology, psychology, and cybersecurity to explore the motivations of human traffickers and the cybersecurity challenges in combating trafficking. Criminology provides insights into the organizational structure, socioeconomic contexts shaping trafficking behavior. Psychology sheds light on individual characteristics and cognitive processes driving trafficker motivations, such as narcissism and desire for power. Cybersecurity illuminates the role of technology in trafficking operations and the challenges of tracking traffickers online. Despite disciplinary conflicts, integrating diverse perspectives offers a well-rounded understanding of human trafficking, emphasizing the need for collaborative efforts to address this pervasive crime effectively. Future research should focus on filling gaps in data and incorporating additional disciplines to develop comprehensive strategies for prevention and intervention. Interdisciplinary collaboration is crucial in working towards eradicating human trafficking and upholding the rights and dignity of all individuals.

**Keywords:** *Human Trafficking, Organized Crime Groups, Psychopathy*

## **Unveiling the Complexities of Human Trafficking: Exploring Motivations and Cybersecurity Challenges through an interdisciplinary lens**

### **Introduction**

Human trafficking represents a multifaceted and pervasive form of exploitation that poses significant challenges to societies worldwide. Besides making money, what are the major motivations of human traffickers and what are the major cybersecurity challenges to combating human trafficking? While the pursuit of financial gain remains a central motivation for human traffickers their actions are driven by complex factors that extend beyond economic incentives. Consequently, understanding the motives of human traffickers necessitates an interdisciplinary approach that draws upon insights from various fields including criminology, psychology, and cybersecurity. Using criminology to answer this research question can provide insight into the underlying dynamic of human trafficking including social, economic, and characteristic factors that contribute to its perpetuation. Moreover, criminology provides insight into the structural factors of human trafficking and organized crime. A Psychology lens deepens the understanding of perpetuating behaviors and victim-centric approaches. Highlighting the interconnectedness of psychology with other social factors and causes offers a different outlook on the motivations of human trafficking. Integrating a cybersecurity lens leverages cybersecurity tools, technology, and strategies to explain the cybersecurity challenges associated with human trafficking, offering a more technically focused approach. By using an interdisciplinary approach, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of the motivations behind human trafficking and the complex challenges associated with combating it effectively. Each discipline offers unique perspectives, methodologies and expertise which allows us to explore the interconnected nature of human trafficking and its root causes. This research question is of paramount importance as it

addresses one of the most pressing human rights issues to date. As a student learning the importance of interdisciplinary studies, exploring this topic aligns with my goals to integrate knowledge from diverse fields to address a complex real-world challenge. Additionally, the issue of human trafficking is a major debate in both international relations and cybersecurity which aligns perfectly with my current and future fields of study. By engaging in this discussion, I am contributing to ongoing efforts to combat and understand human trafficking. Also, including this paper in my IDS 493 portfolio allows me to display my interest and ability to integrate knowledge from diverse disciplines to analyze complex issues and propose viable solutions.

Human trafficking, organized crime groups, and psychopathy are among the key terms used in this paper. Nita Belles (2018), a leading expert in the anti-human trafficking movement, uses the United Nations Protocol definition to define *human trafficking*. The UN defines the term as:

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, or the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation. (p. 3)

Belles (2018) elaborates that human trafficking is composed of subsets such as sex trafficking and forced labor trafficking. For this research human trafficking will be used as an umbrella term to include all forms of human trafficking. According to Nancy Sidun's (2018) usage of the term *organized crime group*, it is defined as an organization that combines distinctive business strategies, use of violence, and corruption to carry out criminal acts with the overall goal of financial or political gain (p. 99). Specific characteristics of criminal

organizations vary on the geographical location they are operating out of (Sidun, 2018).

*Psychopathy* is a mental disorder characterized by violent, manipulative, and deceptive behaviors. Individuals who exhibit psychopathic behavior often have deviant lifestyles and personality traits. The most defining characteristic of a psychopath is their lack of empathy and callousness which allows them to commit deviant acts without remorse (Hargreaves-Cormany, 2022).

### **Criminology**

Criminology offers valuable insights into the motivations behind human trafficking beyond monetary factors, highlighting a range of factors that contribute to this crime. One perspective from criminology is that female victims are often turned into facilitators through coercion and manipulation. Women and girls are disproportionately victimized by human trafficking. In a 2014 study using data from 85 countries, it was estimated that women and girls make up 71% of victims trafficked for either forced labor or sexual exploitation (Kaye & Winterdyk, 2012, p. 56). In criminological studies it is often assumed that women who are perpetrators of trafficking were once victims themselves which could fuel their motivation to participate. They could be using their participation to escape the act of prostitution (Kaye & Winterdyk, 2012). Female offenders are most likely to be most involved in the recruitment process because they are by default seen as more trustworthy. Traffickers leverage this by using females to draw in victims. There are a few different theories on how the relationship between victim and perpetrator morphs but research on female offenders is hard to come by (Kaye & Winterdyk, 2012). Traffickers can also be motivated by the criminal organization they are affiliated with. Depending on location and culture, some organizations are politically motivated and operate by a strict code of loyalty. This leads to criminals being pressured to continue

facilitating trafficking after an initial incentive that puts them in a tough position. Even if these factors are not the initial motivation, loyalty and intimidation stemming from the organization can be a motivator for traffickers. It is important to note that traffickers who are part of a criminal organization usually have an advantage over single operatives. Transnational criminal organizations can intimidate law enforcement and facilitate trafficking through a complex series of operations which help them stay undetected (Sidun, 2018). Scholars of this discipline who are concerned with the legality of definitions that define human trafficking want it to be clear that trafficking, prostitution, and smuggling are all different terms and shall not be used interchangeably, despite that oftentimes being the case. Additionally, it is important to acknowledge the difference between women and children in research and legislation (Wijkman & Kleemans, 2019). Splitting hairs on these definitions is crucial for accurate research as it permits criminological analyses to pinpoint distinct risk factors.

### **Psychology**

Psychological factors play a significant role in both the motivations of trafficking and the victimization of individuals. Perpetrators may exhibit traits such as narcissism, psychopathy, and or a desire for power and control, which fuel their involvement in trafficking. Psychopathic pimps often create genuine emotional attachments to manipulate their victims. The reality of those attachments is that they are “ultimately insincere” (Hargreaves-Cormany et al. 2022, p.377) and pimps often consider their victims as property and not autonomous beings. Over the course of time the severity of violence used to control victims has increased and this may be because individuals who display psychopathic behaviors are resistant to treatment and intervention because they lack empathy (Hargreaves-Cormany et al., 2022). Additionally, Hargreaves-Cormany (2022) asserts there is data that proposes “once a person has met enough

criteria for diagnosis, they are extremely unlikely to ever dip below the threshold toward normalcy ever again” (p. 371). A result of this is that individuals who display psychopathy are susceptible to violence at a more predictable rate. Psychopaths commit 50% of all serious crimes and commit about triple the amount of violent crime as non-psychopaths (Hargraves-Cormany et al. 2022. p371). In addition to psychopathy, traffickers are often motivated by desire to seek power and control over victims, using coercion, intimidation, and violence to maintain dominance. Psychology scholars Angela Fernandes, Mariana Goncalves, and Marlene Matos from the University of Minho, Braga, Portugal School of Psychology (2020) assert that “traffickers exploit those who are vulnerable at multiple levels and are struggling to meet their basic needs” (p. 245). This assertion means that victims are chosen deliberately with the intent to use their position to manipulate them into situations they otherwise would not submit to. Narcissism, psychopathy, and controlling tendencies can be manifested into different motivations and rationale for trafficking. For example, A Haitian child trafficker justified his actions by insisting he was a humanitarian that gave children a better home by placing them with his clients. For a rational, non-psychopathic person this justification does not make any sense but when narcissism and other deviant behaviors are at play it changes perspective. Other traffickers insisted they were continuing a cycle, enticed by the fun, or just plainly working a job (Sidun, 2018, p.104).

### **Cybersecurity**

Technology has exacerbated the issue of human trafficking and increased communication between traffickers, victims, and buyers. This is being done on both surface and dark web platforms using recurring keywords and phrases for advertisements (Dukes, 2020). The outcome of this is trafficking becoming a transnational issue and operation. While technology and the

cyberworld have contributed to the growth of human trafficking, it is also being used to combat it (Dukes, 2020). In an interview conducted by Briget Dukes (2020) it was stated that “cybersecurity is generally an effective, efficient means of protection against sex trafficking” (p. 16). While cybersecurity is an effective method there are challenges associated with using it as a tool to combat human trafficking. Technological advancements have made the human trafficking industry grow exponentially and the organizations tasked with keeping track of the extent of trafficking are struggling to comprehend this global crisis. Additionally, human trafficking case data is flawed for a multitude of reasons. Varying policies, definitions, approaches, and difficulty identifying victims are just a few of the reasons cited by the cybersecurity discipline responsible for flawed data (Borrelli & Caltagirone, 2020). It is hard to expect accurate reporting of efforts if the initial scope of the issue is unknown. Technological advancements are feeding into these issues. Trafficking content is being moved deep into the web to avoid detection making it harder for cybersecurity professionals to recover information. According to cybersecurity expert Danielle Borrelli and Global Emancipation Network director, Sherrie Caltagirone (2020) moving content to the dark web makes it “more difficult, expensive, and resource and expertise intensive to access” (p. 81). Individuals with adequate cybersecurity experience for such operations are difficult to find, which creates another issue. Additionally, the movement of information is commonly done transnationally creating authority issues for law enforcement agencies, meaning that even if acquiring resources and professionals are not an issue the actual prosecution of the crime can be a challenge (Borrelli & Caltagirone, 2020).

### **Common Ground**

There are three major commonalities disclosed by this interdisciplinary research. Firstly, perpetrator analysis is essential to understanding the motivations of human traffickers. The



criminology discipline offers valuable insight into the organizational structures, operational patterns, and socio-economic contexts that shape the behavior of human traffickers. Psychology contributes to perpetrator analysis by offering perspectives on the individual characteristics, cognitive processes, and emotional dynamics that influence trafficker behavior.

Secondly, there is a lack of adequate data and research that hinders the understanding of human trafficking. Criminology addresses the gaps in research pertaining to female offenders and male victims which hinders our ability to assess their motivations. Like criminology, there are gaps in psychological research on gender and power dynamics in shaping trafficking relationships and motivations. The cybersecurity discipline shows that the lack of research in human trafficking reflects poorly on our ability to combat it using cybersecurity strategies.

Lastly, the intersection of criminology and cybersecurity emphasizes the need for enhanced collaboration between law enforcement efficiency and technology sectors. Cybersecurity analysis involves the increasing role of technology in trafficking operations. Criminology and psychology principles are effective in understanding the crimes that cybersecurity is used to combat, and the challenges associated with doing so.

### **Disciplinary Conflicts**

One conflict that may arise between insights and their sources in interdisciplinary research on human trafficking is the differing emphasis on individual versus systemic factors driving trafficker motivations. While psychology often focuses on individual-level determinants such as profile and trauma, criminology tends to highlight systemic factors such as involvement with an organization and socioeconomic statuses. Cybersecurity is a very technical discipline that is naturally solution oriented. This results in cybersecurity often ignoring personal factors completely to rely solely on technical aspects. To bridge the difference, researchers could adopt

an integrated approach that integrates individual, systemic, and technical perspectives recognizing the interconnectedness between personal vulnerabilities and broader structural issues shaping trafficker motivations. Additionally, conflicts may arise regarding the ethical considerations involved in combating human trafficking, particularly concerning privacy rights, data protection, and law enforcement. Psychology may emphasize the importance of confidentiality and consent when working with perpetrators and victims, while cybersecurity analysis may prioritize data collection and surveillance measures for tracking traffickers online. To address these conflicts, interdisciplinary researchers could engage in ethical discussions and develop guidelines that balance the need for information sharing and protections, ensuring that anti-trafficking efforts uphold ethical principles and human rights standards.

#### **Ch. 12: “Constructing a More Comprehensive Understanding or Theory”?**

To construct a more comprehensive understanding of the research question, what are the major motivations of human traffickers and what are the major cybersecurity challenges to combating human trafficking, it is essential to delve into interdisciplinary perspectives and methodologies. By combining insights from various disciplines, such as psychology, criminology, and cybersecurity, a holistic understanding of the topic can be achieved. This approach enables a complex examination of human trafficking motivations, cybersecurity strategies, and challenges. By integrating diverse perspectives and data sources, researchers can uncover the intricate dynamics underlying human trafficking and develop more effective strategies for prevention and intervention.

#### **Ch. 13: “Reflecting On, Testing, and Communicating the Understanding or Theory”**

To enhance understanding or test theories on human trafficking motivations and cybersecurity challenges, future research could integrate additional disciplines such as sociology

and anthropology to explore new dimensions of the issue. For instance, employing psychological perspectives could illuminate societal structures and cultural factors influencing trafficking dynamics; anthropological perspectives could offer unique insights into the cultural, social, and historical contexts shaping trafficking motivations. This would be useful because human trafficking facilitates difference according to geographical location and culture. Additionally, conducting fieldwork in specific countries or regions heavily impacted by trafficking could provide valuable insights into local contexts, challenges, motivations, and effective interventions. Collaborative efforts between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers are vital for generating actionable insights and advancing evidence-based strategies to combat human trafficking and address cybersecurity challenges effectively. Additionally focusing on filling the gaps in data for female offenders and male victims could contribute to a more accurate comprehensive theory.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this interdisciplinary exploration of human trafficking motivations and cybersecurity challenges has unveiled the complex and interconnected nature of this global issue. Beyond the pursuit of financial gain, this analysis reveals that traffickers are driven by many factors, including psychological dynamics, societal vulnerabilities, and organizational affiliations. Through the lenses of criminology, psychology, and cybersecurity, we have gained valuable insights into the root causes and perpetuating factors of human trafficking, highlighting the importance of an integral understanding in combating this crime effectively.

This research emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts across disciplines to address the multifaceted challenges posed by human trafficking. By integrating insights from criminology, psychology, cybersecurity, and potentially other disciplines such as sociology and anthropology,

we can develop comprehensive strategies that account for the diverse motivations of traffickers and the complex dynamic at play. Moreover, my findings emphasize the importance of filling gaps in research and data, particularly concerning underrepresented groups such as female offenders and male victims, as well as the impact of cultural and geographical variations. Moving forward, it is important to translate this research into actionable interventions and policies that prioritize the protection of vulnerable populations and the prosecution of traffickers. By collaborating and using an interdisciplinary approach we can work towards a future where human trafficking is eradicated and the rights and dignity of all individuals are upheld.

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