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# Assessing Human Trafficking and Cybercrime Intersections Through Survivor Narratives

Suleman Lazarus <sup>a,b,c</sup>, Mina Chiang <sup>d</sup>, and Mark Button <sup>e</sup>

<sup>a</sup>University of Surrey, Guildford, UK; <sup>b</sup>London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), London, UK; <sup>c</sup>University of the Western Cape, Cape Town, South Africa; <sup>d</sup>Humanity Research Consultancy Limited, Hove, UK; <sup>e</sup>University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK

## ABSTRACT

This study examines how cybercriminals exploit deceptive recruitment tactics and digital platforms to entrap and exploit victims in human trafficking within the cybercrime context. It employs Migration and Transnationalism perspectives to elucidate the intersection of human trafficking and cybercrime operations in Cambodia. Using thematic analysis of victim testimonies, we identify six main themes: (1) Deception and Recruitment, (2) Manipulation and Control, (3) Exploitation and Forced Labor, (4) Trading and Movement, (5) Scamming Methods, and (6) Escape and Rescue. While the following analysis explores the victim's first-hand experiences within these themes, it also reflects the accounts of other victims referenced in his story. Human traffickers enticed victims with fraudulent job offers and misleading promises, compelling them to pay significant recruitment fees. After recruitment, they manipulated victims through tactics such as visa deception and bribery at immigration to ensure compliance and control. They subjected victims to harsh working conditions, enforcing extended hours, unrealistic targets, and physical punishments for underperformance. Strict security measures and trading between companies and compounds further complicated escape efforts. Criminals trained victims to forge identities and exploit targets via social media, effectively turning them into online fraudsters. However, some managed to escape with assistance from NGOs, highlighting the vital role of organizational support in rescue operations. We highlight the need for targeted interventions and support for victims of such complex cybercrime enterprises.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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## Introduction

Trafficking in persons (TIP), a severe violation of human rights, has traditionally encompassed heinous practices such as forced prostitution, slavery, and organ trafficking (Carpenter 2024; George, Tsourtos, and McNaughton 2018; Lo Iacono 2014; Ogunniran 2017; Scalia 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime UNODC 2000). Recognized as a criminal offense under international law (Lo Iacono 2014; Ogunniran 2017; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner OHCHR 2023), this illicit practice has evolved significantly with the advent of the digital age. The rapid growth of organized online crime, driven by substantial profits, has compelled traffickers to adapt their strategies, coercing victims into cyber scams under the guise of legitimate employment. This adaptation has led to the emergence of “forced criminality,” where victims are manipulated into engaging in cybercrimes, thereby expanding the scope of traditional human trafficking (Hingston and Hingston 2023; Humanity Research Consultancy 2022; Sarkar and Shukla 2024; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner OHCHR 2023).

**CONTACT** Suleman Lazarus  [suleman.lazarus@gmail.com](mailto:suleman.lazarus@gmail.com)  University of Surrey, Stag Hill, Guildford GU2 7XH, UK

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The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated this issue, contributing to a surge in trafficking in persons and exploitation for forced criminality across Southeast Asia. A 2023 report by the OHCHR estimates that hundreds of thousands of individuals are involuntarily held in “cyber-scam” operations in Cambodia, Myanmar, and Laos. The Mekong countries alone are estimated to generate \$43.8 billion in funds for criminal syndicates from scams each year (USIP Senior Study Group 2024:9). These operations, often situated in special economic zones or repurposed leisure facilities such as casinos and hotels, are managed by syndicates with deep-rooted connections to criminal networks and significant political protection (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024a; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner OHCHR 2023). Victims from more than 60 countries in Asia, Africa, America, and Europe are coerced into various scam operations and online gambling enterprises (International Organization for Migration 2024; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner OHCHR 2023; USIP Senior Study Group 2024).

Victim testimonies reveal a sophisticated web of deception and coercion. Individuals are lured with promises of high-paying jobs, only to find themselves trapped in scamming compounds under harsh and controlled conditions. Deceptive recruitment strategies involve false job offers and visa manipulations, while manipulation and control tactics are used to maintain dominance over the victims. For instance, traffickers often exploit corrupt officials to facilitate the illegal movement of victims across borders, further complicating efforts to escape (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024a, 2024b).

Once entrapped, victims endure exploitative working conditions and forced labor within these cyber scam operations. They are subjected to stringent targets and punitive measures, including extended work hours and physical punishment, for failing to meet unrealistic expectations. The complexity of these operations extends beyond traditional forced labor scenarios involving sophisticated cyber scams where victims are trained to create fake identities and manipulate potential targets online (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024b, 2024c). These findings underscore the systemic nature of this new form of trafficking, highlighting the intricate structures and strategies that traffickers employ to exploit their victims.

This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge by offering a nuanced understanding of the intersection between human trafficking and cybercrime, particularly by centering on the concept of transnationalism. It specifically examines how deceptive recruitment practices, manipulation tactics, and the organizational structures of trafficking networks enable these crimes. By analyzing direct victim testimonies, the study illuminates the mechanisms traffickers use to exploit technology, expanding the reach and efficiency of their operations. This research aims to fill a critical gap in the literature by focusing on the digital adaptation of trafficking strategies and the implications for law enforcement and policy interventions.

The innovation of this study lies in its detailed exploration of how victims of human trafficking are being coerced into conducting scams, fraud, and cybercrime, effectively blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator. Rather than scams being carried out by willing criminals in traditional ways, traffickers have integrated digital platforms and cyber techniques into their operations, compelling victims to participate in illicit activities (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024a, 2024b). This creates a hybrid form of exploitation that transcends conventional trafficking paradigms. Unlike traditional human trafficking, which primarily relies on physical coercion for labor or sexual exploitation, this research highlights how technology is used to deceive, manipulate, and control victims into perpetrating cybercrimes (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d). Traffickers have expanded their criminal repertoire by incorporating victims into cyber-enabled crimes, including online child sexual exploitation through webcams and other digital means (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024a, 2024b, 2024c, 2024d).

Unlike many cybercriminals in West Africa (Alhassan and Ridwan 2023; Garba, Lazarus, and Button 2024; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019; Lazarus et al. 2025; Ojedokun and Eraye 2012; Yushawu and Jaishankar 2025) and Western Europe (Bekkers and Leukfeldt 2022; Bekkers et al. 2023; Leukfeldt, Kleemans, and Stol 2017; Lusthaus et al. 2023) voluntarily participating in criminal enterprises, in Southeast Asia, a significant number of workers are trafficked and

coerced into these activities (Franceschini et al. 2024; Wang and Topalli 2024). Moreover, while some West African online scammers are actively training others who voluntarily enroll in fraudulent schemes (Lazarus and Button 2024; Lazarus and Soares 2025), in Southeast Asia, such as the participants in this study, individuals are forced into cybercriminal activities. This raises the core research question: *How do survivor narratives provide insights into the linkages between human trafficking and cybercrime?* Although both willing and coerced participants in cybercriminal enterprises are transnational in nature, impacting actions and consequences. This distinction underlines the need for a nuanced understanding of the diverse contexts and mechanisms through which individuals become involved in cybercrime. The current study emphasizes the importance of examining not only the socioeconomic factors that contribute to cybercrime but also the coercive and exploitative dynamics that force individuals into these criminal activities.

This shift has significant implications for understanding the evolving nature of trafficking and cybercrime. It spotlights the need to reevaluate existing legal frameworks and intervention strategies, as victims may be misidentified as offenders. By shedding light on the trafficking and coercion of cybercriminals, this study seeks to broaden the discourse beyond the prevailing narrative of voluntary participation in cybercrime scholarship. By doing so, it aims to inform more targeted interventions and policy responses that address the root causes of exploitation within cybercrime networks. Developing targeted interventions requires acknowledging this complex dynamic, where technology facilitates new forms of exploitation that challenge traditional classifications of crime and victimhood.

### **The objectives of this study are**

- Analyse survivor narratives to identify how transnational human trafficking facilitates cybercrime.
- Contextualize these practices within the broader literature on human trafficking and cybercrime, highlighting commonalities and unique aspects of the case study.
- Propose recommendations to address the intersection of transnational cybercrime and human trafficking, informed by survivor insights.

The paper is structured as follows: the literature review, theory section, and methodology section. The findings are then presented in six thematic areas: Deception and Recruitment, Manipulation and Control, Exploitation and Forced Labor, Trading and Movement, Scamming Methods, and Escape and Rescue, each supported by direct victim testimonies. The study offers a more in-depth discussion and concludes by emphasizing the need for targeted, culturally sensitive prevention strategies and robust international cooperation to address these evolving threats.

## **Literature**

Human trafficking is recognized as a form of transnational organized crime due to its systematic and coordinated nature, often involving border crossing, complex networks and hierarchical structures (Campana 2016; Cohen 2023; L'Hoiry, Moretti, and Antonopoulos 2024; Maweni et al. 2023; Scalia 2024; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime UNODC 2000). However, this article intentionally shifts away from the ongoing debates surrounding traditional forms of human trafficking, such as sex trafficking and forced labor within supply chains. Instead, it zeroes in on the nexus of cybercrime and human trafficking, aiming to elucidate the unique interplay between these two transnational organized crimes. The study contributes to the limited empirical literature by focusing on these coercive methods within the context of cybercrime. In turn, it highlights an urgent need to address the intersection between human trafficking and cybercrime from a victim-centered perspective.

### Related works

The challenge scam compounds pose in terms of their size and nature of their operations has been noted by several researchers (Franceschini et al. 2024; Franceschini, Li, and Bo 2023, 2025; United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner OHCHR 2023; USIP Senior Study Group 2024), but none of these have explored and present in-depth testimonies of survivors. Wang and Dickinson (2024) explored the reciprocal interaction, or feedback mechanism, between online romance fraudsters and victims of Trafficking in Persons (TIP), which facilitates the crime. They analyzed sequential e-mail exchanges with 94 online romance fraudsters, revealing that fraudsters' self-selective strategies are shaped by a feedback process between their messages and the victim's responses. This finding underscores the dynamic nature of online scams, where perpetrators continuously adapt their tactics based on victim responses – a concept that is also relevant in the context of cyber-enabled human trafficking examined in this study. Similarly, Bouche, Farrell, and Wittmer (2016) demonstrated how traffickers adapt their tactics in response to law enforcement and victim behavior, a pattern also observable in cybercrime dynamics.

Wang and Topalli (2024) identified a new form of online fraud known as Intimacy Manipulated Fraud Industrialization (IMFI). This type of fraud resembles traditional online romance scams and catfishing, but it is systematized on a larger scale through organized crime enterprises that often disguise themselves as legitimate software platforms and customer service providers (e.g., Wang 2024; Wang and Topalli 2024). Companies often force individuals into deviant roles as chat moderators or “customer service providers” (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024a; United Nations 2023) or hire them under the pretense of promoting social media engagement (Wang and Topalli 2024). This system results in a dual exploitation dynamic where workers serve as both exploiters of their clients and victims of the company, highlighting the complex and deceptive nature of these operations (United Nations 2023; Wang and Topalli 2024). This study aims to demonstrate how victims are coerced into fraudulent labor under the pretense of legitimate employment, expanding the concept of Intimacy Manipulated Fraud Industrialization (IMFI) (e.g., Wang and Topalli 2024). Unlike traditional IMFI, which primarily focuses on “intimacy,” this research emphasizes non-romantic forms of manipulation, showcasing the broader applicability of IMFI in different types of cybercrime. Similarly, Carpenter (2024), Lo Iacono (2014), George, Tsourtos, and McNaughton (2018), and Ogunniran (2017) explored coercion tactics used in labor trafficking, underscoring how false promises of employment are frequently used to deceive and exploit victims. This is a tactic mirrored in recent cyber-enabled trafficking schemes.

Han and Button (2025), Cross (2023), Wang (2024), and Whittaker, Lazarus, and Corcoran (2024) identified several core features of “pig butchering scams,”<sup>1</sup> also known as Sha Zhu Pan (殺豬盤 in Mandarin). It mirrors human trafficking and cybercrime forced labor. “Pig butchering scams” refer to a type of online fraud where victims are systematically manipulated over a period of time into making substantial financial investments in fraudulent schemes (Han and Button 2025; Whittaker et al. 2024; Whittaker and Lazarus 2024). The term is derived from the analogy of fattening up a pig before slaughter, as scammers spend weeks or months building trust and grooming their victims through fake relationships, often using social engineering techniques (Han and Button 2025; Cross 2023). Once the victim is convinced to invest significant amounts of money, the scammers “slaughter” the pig by stealing the funds and disappearing (Han and Button 2025; Wang 2024; Whittaker et al. 2024). These scams usually involve fake investment platforms, cryptocurrencies, or high-yield opportunities that appear legitimate but are entirely fabricated, often leading to severe financial and emotional harm to victims (Cross 2023; Whittaker, Lazarus, and Corcoran 2024). By analyzing victim testimonial data

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<sup>1</sup>In this article, the term “pig butchering scams” is critically considered as a form of dehumanization, reducing fraud victims to subhuman status. The analogy likens victims of the scheme to game animals, reinforcing a perception of intellectual superiority among offenders. Furthermore, the distinction between active and passive dehumanization of cybercrime victims highlights how the uncritical use of pig butchering in academic and media discourse perpetuates passive dehumanization, effectively normalizing victim-blaming and re-victimization. See Whittaker, Lazarus, and Corcoran's (2024) work for a fuller analysis.

from two prominent online sources, Wang (2024) presents a multi-stage model outlining the identity transformation process experienced by trafficked Chinese workers, leading to the development of a victim-offender identity. Wang (2024) also highlights strategies employed by these individuals to manage their unique identities after escaping scam operations. The manifestations of these linkages suggest that traffickers have adopted cybercrime techniques into their operations or that cybercriminals have shifted their focus toward human trafficking. Similarly, Kara (2017) emphasized how technological advancements have facilitated human trafficking by enabling traffickers to manipulate victims more effectively and reach broader audiences.

While the present study, like those by Wang (2024) and Wang and Topalli (2024), examines victim testimonial data from prominent online sources, it differs in focus. Wang (2024) concentrated on the elements of the pig-butcher scam, whereas Wang and Topalli (2024) focused more broadly on romance scams. This research specifically examines the deceptive recruitment of victims into forced labor as scammers involved in various socioeconomic cybercrimes. Notably, this study's victim is a computer and engineering graduate, adding a unique dimension to the analysis and highlighting how individuals with specialized skills are also targeted and exploited. By comparing and contrasting the findings of Wang and Dickinson (2024), Wang and Topalli (2024), and Wang (2024), this study highlights the unique aspects of deceptive recruitment and forced labor in the cybercrime context. These comparisons underscore the importance of understanding the evolving tactics of traffickers and the dual exploitation dynamic present in modern scam operations. Moreover, other studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the broader context of digital labor exploitation. For example, Humanity Research Consultancy (2024a) and the United Nations (2023) emphasized the need for a comprehensive analysis of how digital platforms can facilitate exploitation, providing a critical backdrop for the current research.

We acknowledge the limited academic literature on the connection between cybercrime and human trafficking, as this phenomenon has only emerged in recent years. Due to this scarcity of research, we have relied on the small group of works cited above. To address this gap, we have integrated additional sources from broader research on digital labor exploitation and human trafficking, offering a more nuanced perspective on the evolving linkages between these phenomena. This interdisciplinary approach allows us to expand the theoretical foundation of this study. It integrates insights from established frameworks to better understand the mechanisms of control and exploitation within cybercrime-enabled human trafficking.

## Theories: Migration and Transnationalism perspectives

The evolution of trafficking practices necessitates applying Migration and Transnationalism theories to contemporary manifestations of exploitation, intersecting cybercrime, and human trafficking. This study explores the components of Migration and Transnationalism Theories to understand the underlying dynamics. These theories offer a framework for understanding how human mobility intersects with exploitation, particularly in the context of human trafficking (Castles 2010; Faist 2000; Portes 1997; Salt 2000). Although not developed by a single scholar, significant contributions have been made by researchers outlined in Table 1. Scholars such as Faist (2000), Portes (1997), and Schiller et al. (1995) have been instrumental in this development. Faist (2000) introduced the concept of transnational social spaces, exploring the dynamics of international migration. Portes (1997) highlighted the sustained ties migrants maintain across borders, while Schiller et al. (1995) conceptualized transnationalism as creating and maintaining multi-stranded social relations linking immigrants' societies of origin and settlement. These works laid the foundation for understanding the socio economic, political, and cultural processes that influence migration and transnational activities, as outlined in Table 1.

Outlined in Table 1 are vital for analyzing how structural inequalities, restrictive migration policies, and organized crime networks facilitate trafficking and exploitation. Therefore, the changing dynamics of trafficking practices require the application of Migration and Transnationalism theories



**Table 1.** Key Propositions and Critical Components of Migration and Transnationalism Theories.

Theory Propositions and Components	Description	Contributors
1. Transnational Social Spaces	Migration creates transnational social spaces that connect migrants' societies of origin and settlement, influencing socioeconomic and cultural exchanges.	Faist 2000
2. Global Ties and Networks	Migrants maintain sustained ties across borders, impacting social, economic, and political dynamics in both home and host countries. This interconnectedness shapes migration patterns and transnational identities.	Portes 1997
3. Multi-Stranded Relationships	Transnationalism involves complex social relations that link individuals and groups across nation-states, influencing their identities and practices. These relationships span cultural, economic, and political spheres.	Schiller et al. 1995
4. Push and Pull Factors	Economic hardship, political instability, violence, and lack of opportunities push individuals to migrate, while perceived economic opportunities, safety, and better quality of life in destination countries pull them. Traffickers exploit these factors by offering deceptive promises of employment, education, or safe passage.	Lee 1966
5. Structural and Institutional Barriers	Restrictive immigration policies, border controls, and limited legal pathways for migration increase vulnerabilities to trafficking. When legal avenues are closed, individuals may turn to irregular and dangerous routes, often facilitated by traffickers.	de Haas 2010
6. Transnational Criminal Networks	Trafficking is often facilitated by transnational criminal networks that operate across borders, exploiting legal and socioeconomic gaps. These networks adapt to digital platforms and cyber-enabled crimes, leveraging weak law enforcement and differing legal frameworks.	Shelley 2012
7. Diaspora and Migrant Communities	Established diaspora and migrant communities in destination countries can provide support to newly arrived migrants but may also be exploited by traffickers to recruit and control victims through social ties and cultural familiarity.	Faist 2000
8. Remittances and Economic Pressures	Migrants face pressure to send remittances back to their families, making them susceptible to traffickers who exploit this economic burden with false promises of high wages. Dependence on remittances makes it difficult for victims to escape trafficking.	Hugo 1998
9. Structural Vulnerabilities	Global economic disparities, restrictive migration policies, and organised crime networks create vulnerabilities that traffickers exploit to facilitate human trafficking and exploitation.	de Haas 2010
10. Adaptation and Evolution	Theories evolve to address new forms of exploitation, such as the digital adaptation of trafficking strategies that leverage global disparities and digital platforms to control and manipulate victims <sup>1</sup> .	Castles 2010

to understand the modern intersections between cybercrime and human trafficking (as stated above). By examining global economic inequalities, restrictive migration policies, and transnational criminal organizations, this framework emphasizes the need for coordinated international interventions that tackle both the root causes of trafficking and the immediate needs of victims. It offers a global perspective on trafficking, considering the roles of international labor markets, immigration policies, and transnational criminal organizations. This expanded understanding is crucial for addressing the digital adaptation of trafficking strategies, where technology is used to deceive, manipulate, and control victims into perpetrating cybercrimes.

## Methods and material

### *Research design & data collection*

This research employs a single case-study approach, similar to previous studies on specific forms of fraud. Carter (2021) examined online romance fraud, Lazarus (2024) evaluated business email compromise (BEC), and Marquart and Thompson (2024) investigated fraud against a senior citizen. Each of these three studies, like the present research, has a single case as its focal point. The data informing this article come from the direct testimony of a human trafficking victim. While this might seem insufficient at first glance, research in this area faces significant challenges in securing participants. There are few individuals who are “freed” and accessible for research purposes. Among those who are freed, many are reluctant to share their experiences, even anonymously, due to fear of retaliation from the dangerous criminal gangs that previously held them captive.

Moreover, as the phenomenon of scamming compounds is relatively recent, most survivors of human trafficking are still struggling to secure funds for return flights, resolve debts incurred prior to their departure, and recover from trauma (e.g., Humanity Research Consultancy 2024b, 2024c). As a result, participating in research often becomes a low priority in their lives, and approaching survivors in such a vulnerable state would be unethical. Additionally, while many individuals who leave scam compounds identify as victims of human trafficking, there have been instances where willing criminals and scammers pose as victims to evade prosecution. Similarly, Weitzer (2014) and Weitzer (2007) pointed out that human trafficking and migration experiences vary widely, ranging from coercion and exploitation to cooperative, consensual, and mutually beneficial arrangements. This complicates researchers' efforts, making it challenging to distinguish genuine victims without trusted sources.

In such a challenging environment, exploratory research like this becomes the only viable option and has been successfully employed by scholars in similarly difficult contexts. For example, Gray (2013) developed a compelling article based on the public questioning of a convicted white-collar criminal, offering valuable insights into institutional corruption – another area where research participants are difficult to secure. Following the tradition of exploratory research in sensitive areas, this study analyses publicly available testimonial data from Humanity Research Consultancy. This approach is similar to those used by Wang and Topalli (2024) and Wang (2024), who also analyzed publicly accessible direct testimonial data from human trafficking victims. While the initial publication presented the raw narrative of a human trafficking victim, this research builds on that by focusing on a single representative case and extending it beyond mere storytelling. By doing so, it provides researchers and audiences with deeper insights into the lived experience of one individual, capturing nuanced details and complexities that might otherwise be overlooked. This approach enhances understanding by following the flow of one person's experience, offering a rich, detailed perspective that significantly contributes to the field.

Hence, we explore the utility of Migration and Transnationalism Theories to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics and complex interplay between human mobility and exploitation. The objective is to conduct a comprehensive thematic analysis, contextualizing the data within the existing literature on human trafficking and cybercrime and using theoretical frameworks to interpret the socioeconomic and cultural factors influencing exploitation. The primary data source is the narrative account of a human trafficking survivor, as documented in Humanity Research Consultancy (2024e), which details his harrowing experiences within scamming compounds in Cambodia. These narratives are examined through the lens of Migration and Transnationalism Theories, providing a structured framework for interpreting the complexities of human mobility and its role in exploitation. This narrative provides a rich, first-hand account of the deception, manipulation, and exploitation faced by victims of human trafficking, which is further understood through the theoretical perspectives outlined in Table 1.

### ***Thematic analysis***

Following prior empirical studies (e.g., George, Tsourtos, and McNaughton 2018), we adopted Braun and Clarke's framework for thematic analysis. Additionally, we incorporated the UNODC (2023a) indicators for trafficking in persons for forced criminality, particularly cybercrime. The analysis process began with familiarization, involving repeated readings of the narrative to identify preliminary patterns. Data was then systematically coded to capture explicit statements and underlying meanings. These codes were grouped into potential themes, which were reviewed and refined to ensure coherence and consistency. Themes were clearly defined and named, with sub-themes identified for further depth. The final step involved synthesizing themes into a coherent narrative, integrating illustrative quotes and situating the findings within the broader literature on human trafficking and cybercrime.



**Table 2.** Thematized Summary of Testimonies of a Human Trafficking Victim.

Theme	Definition	Labels	Characteristics	Subthemes/ Sub-codes	Example of Supporting Quote
<b>Theme 1:</b> Deception and Recruitment	The process of misleading individuals into fraudulent schemes.	Deceptive Promises, Misleading Information, Recruitment Fees	Involves false job promises, misleading details about the job, and high recruitment fees.	Deceptive Promises, Misleading Information, Recruitment Fees	"One of my school friends offered me a well-paid job in Cambodia."
<b>Theme 2:</b> Manipulation and Control	Tactics used to influence and dominate individuals to comply with fraudulent activities.	Passport confiscation, Surveillance and Control	Involves taking away individuals' passports and constant monitoring.	Visa Deception, Immigration Corruption, Surveillance and Control	"My friend's uncle offered to let me go on a 'tourist' visa."
<b>Theme 3:</b> Exploitation and Forced Labor	Coercing individuals to work under harsh conditions with little to no compensation.	Work Conditions, Targets and Punishments, Physical Punishments	Characterised by long hours, unrealistic targets, and physical punishments.	Work Conditions, Targets and Punishments, Physical Punishments	"The office was located on the fourth floor with very loud music playing."
<b>Theme 4:</b> Trading and Movement	The illegal trade and movement of individuals for exploitation.	Being Sold Between Companies, High Security	Involves transferring individuals between companies and maintaining high security to prevent escape.	Being Sold Between Companies, High Security	"They indeed sold us to another company in Sihanoukville."
<b>Theme 5:</b> Scamming Methods	Techniques used to deceive victims and extract money.	Creating Fake Identities, Manipulating Victims	Involves creating fake social media profiles and using psychological manipulation.	Creating Fake Identities, Manipulating Victims	"The Teacher Boss taught us how to open a Twitter account and create 10 accounts each."
<b>Theme 6:</b> Escape and Rescue	Efforts and assistance in escaping from fraudulent schemes and captivity.	Attempts to Leave, Assistance from NGOs, Final Rescue	Involves contacting brokers and NGOs, and receiving help to escape.	Attempts to Leave, Assistance from NGOs, Final Rescue	"By the third week, I began contacting my brokers in Bangladesh and Cambodia to help me leave."

### Coding and data analysis

The primary author conducted the initial coding, followed by a collaborative review with a coauthor. Discrepancies between coders were resolved through thorough discussions to ensure consistency and minimize individual biases. This rigorous process provided a structured and systematic approach to data analysis while allowing for the discovery of unexpected insights. Each code underwent meticulous review to ensure its accuracy and relevance. Patterns and relationships between themes were then analyzed to better understand the victim's experiences. This thematic analysis (detailed in [Table 2](#)) provides a systematic exploration of the victim's narrative, offering valuable insights into the mechanisms of human trafficking and cybercrime. Throughout the research process, efforts were made to uphold the dignity and privacy of the victim. Since the study relied solely on publicly available data, it did not require ethical approval and adhered strictly to the principles outlined in the Declaration of Helsinki.

### Results

This section presents the findings from the thematic analysis of the victim testimony and other relevant research fused together to provide an analysis of the experience of victims from the best available data (such as Franceschini et al. [2023](#) [2024](#); Sarkar and Shukla [2024](#); United Nations [2023](#);

United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, OHCHR, 2023; UNODC 2023a, 2023b). The analysis revealed six main themes: Deception and Recruitment, Manipulation and Control, Exploitation and Forced Labor, Trading and Movement, Scamming Methods, and Escape and Rescue.

### ***Theme 1: Deception and recruitment***

Victims were often deceived by false promises and misleading information that lured them into scam operations. One victim recounted,

When I had just completed my graduation and was looking for a decent job to support my family, one of my school friends (best friend) reached out to me and offered me a well-paid job in Cambodia.

The job offer included a promise of a substantial salary:

He said if I went there I would get a computer operator job in an online casino with an 800–1200 USD monthly salary (depending on my working capability).

Victims were also misled about additional benefits, such as yearly bonuses and round-trip flight tickets:

I was told they would also give me a yearly bonus and leave with a round-trip flight ticket to spend my leave with family.

### ***Theme 2: Manipulation and control***

Once recruited, victims faced various forms of manipulation and control. A common tactic involved passport confiscation:

He selected four of us for the interview, asked us to give him our passports, and told us that he needed to extend our visas with the company name and work permit. We thought he was correct because we only had 30-day visas and no work permits, so we gave our passports to him.

The victims were also subject to be trained to accept corruption at immigration points:

After I was rejected from immigration the first time, my recruiter trained me to lie at immigration and the recruiter made a verbal contract with an immigration officer. The immigration officer agreed to let me pass for a payment of 500 USD (50,000 BDT).

### ***Theme 3: Exploitation and forced labor***

Victims endured harsh working conditions and were subjected to exploitation and forced labor. The testimony of the victim described the work environment:

The office was located on the fourth floor. As we entered, I heard very loud music playing. I observed several large office rooms where many people were working on computers and mobile phones while listening to loud music.

Failure to meet daily targets led to extended work hours:

After one week of training, we were called into a meeting room and given a daily target: we had to connect with three clients via WhatsApp or Telegram numbers. If we failed to achieve our target, we had to work an extra 30 minutes for each client missed.

### ***Theme 4: Trading and movement***

Victims were often moved between different companies and compounds under high security. One victim shared their experience of being sold:

“After 37 days of work, they indeed sold us to another company in Sihanoukville.”

The compounds had multiple security layers, making escape difficult:

In this compound, there were four levels of security. The first was on every floor of the dormitory, the second was at the first gate of the compound, the third was at the second gate of the compound, and the fourth consisted of special security guards who were ex-army soldiers and officers dressed in black.

### **Theme 5: Scamming methods**

Victims were trained to create fake identities and manipulate potential victims. They were instructed to create multiple social media accounts:

The next day, the Teacher Boss taught us how to open a Twitter account and instructed us to create 10 accounts each. They introduced us to a Chinese app called “Red Book (小红书),” similar to Instagram, and instructed us to find some Red Book accounts where we would find a large number of young girls’ photos.

They used these accounts to deceive clients:

We used photos of young Chinese girls for the accounts. The Teacher Boss taught us to respond to inquiries about our nationality by saying we were half Chinese and half Canadian.

Also used the other methods such as Google Voice to create phone numbers:

In the first few days, we used our old techniques to find people. Then, they introduced us to “Google Voice” and gave us 500 numbers to send messages to every day. We didn’t know how they got those numbers, but when we searched them on Google, we found that they were USA and Canadian numbers.

### **Theme 6: Escape and rescue**

Some victims managed to escape with the help of NGOs. One victim recounted their attempts to leave:

By the third week of my life in that scamming compound, I began contacting my brokers in Bangladesh and Cambodia to help me leave the company.

Assistance from non-governmental organizations like the Global Anti-Scam Organization (GASO) was crucial:

My Bangladeshi friend found an organisation called the Global Anti-Scam Organization (GASO), which rescues victims like us from scamming compounds.

The final rescue was a moment of relief:

After two months of trying, GASO [the Global Anti-Scam Organization], rescued me, my friend, and a Nepali boy from the compound on 4 September 2022.

It emphasizes Friedman’s (2024) research, which suggests that the private sector can help combat modern slavery by adopting ethical business practices prioritizing human rights protection.

## **Discussion**

This study provides an in-depth exploration of the deceptive practices, manipulative tactics, and exploitative conditions faced by victims of human trafficking within the context of cybercrime in Cambodia. The findings align with existing empirical research (e.g., George, Tsourtos, and McNaughton 2018; Wang 2024), highlighting the complex and systematic nature of these exploitative operations. This discussion contextualizes the observed tactics within a broader framework of coercion and control, offering a nuanced understanding of how traffickers maintain dominance over their victims through psychological, physical, and structural mechanisms, as outlined in Migration and Transnationalism perspectives (cf. Faist 2000; Portes, 1997; Schiller et al. 1995).

### ***Deception and recruitment***

Victims were frequently enticed into scam operations through false promises and misleading information, tactics consistent with the push and pull factors outlined in migration theories (cf. de Haas 2010; Shelley 2012). This finding aligns with Wang and Dickinson's (2024) research, which highlights how fraudsters use feedback mechanisms to adjust their strategies based on victim responses. In Cambodia, deceptive job offers, a common pull factor, were used to lure victims. For example, one victim shared, "When I had just completed my graduation and was looking for a decent job to support my family, one of my school friends reached out to me and offered me a well-paid job in Cambodia." This premeditated deception reflects a structured approach to recruitment, underscoring the organized nature of these networks. This aligns with the systematic exploitation processes described in Migration and Transnationalism Theories (de Haas 2010). These findings illustrate how traffickers exploit victims' vulnerabilities and manipulate their perceptions, establishing a power dynamic where victims become dependent on traffickers for the promised opportunities.

### ***Manipulation and control***

Once recruited, victims were subjected to various forms of manipulation and control, including visa deception and corruption at immigration points. This is consistent with the structural and institutional barriers component of Migration and Transnationalism Theories (as outlined in Table 1). Traffickers exploited victims' desperation and the limited legal migration pathways available to them, coercing them into accepting tourist visas with false promises of work permits upon arrival. One victim recounted, "My friend's uncle offered to let me go on a 'tourist' visa. I said I wanted an employment visa. He said it would take 3 months to process, so it would be better to go with the tourist visa, and after I arrive there, the company would give me a work permit." This manipulation was further enabled by corrupt officials, who coached victims to lie at immigration and bribe officers for passage. This complex interplay between deception, control, and institutional manipulation reinforces traffickers' dominance, reflecting the systemic vulnerabilities that enable such exploitation (de Haas 2010).

### ***Exploitation and forced labor***

Victims experienced harsh working conditions and were coerced into exploitative labor, paralleling findings on the pig-butcher scam and victim dehumanization (Whittaker and Lazarus 2024; Whittaker et al., 2024). This aligns with the exploitation component of both Power and Control Theory and the economic pressures highlighted in Migration and Transnationalism Theories. Victims in this study reported working long hours under strict supervision, with severe punishments for not meeting unrealistic targets. As one victim described, "The office was located on the fourth floor. As we entered, I heard very loud music playing. I observed several large office rooms where many people were working on computers and mobile phones while listening to loud music." This depiction of industrialized exploitation reflects the structured nature of these operations, resonating with what Wang and Topalli (2024) describe as Intimacy Manipulated Fraud Industrialization (IMFI). Unlike traditional IMFI, which emphasizes romantic manipulation, this study reveals a broader application of coercion, highlighting the adaptability and expansion of exploitative models within cybercrime contexts.

### ***Trading and movement***

The movement of victims between different companies and compounds under high security further complicated their situation, making escape almost impossible. This aligns with the isolation and control aspects of Migration and Transnationalism Theories. One victim shared their experience:

“After 37 days of work, they sold us to another company in Sihanoukville.” The compounds had multiple security layers, including armed guards, preventing any attempts to escape. This reinforces the traffickers’ control over victims and illustrates the systemic barriers to escape, exacerbated by transnational trafficking networks spanning multiple jurisdictions (Shelley 2012).

### ***Scamming methods***

Victims were trained to create fake identities and manipulate potential targets through social media, reflecting the sophisticated and systematic nature of these operations. This is paralleling the manipulation of economic pressures seen in Migration and Transnationalism theories outlined in Table 1. As one victim explained, “The next day, the Teacher Boss taught us how to open a Twitter account and instructed us to create 10 accounts each.” This training underlines the high level of organization and coordination within these fraudulent enterprises, highlighting the intersection of technological exploitation and human trafficking (cf. Franceschini et al. 2025; Wang and Topalli 2024). The findings also support Friedman’s (2024) call for ethical business practices to combat modern slavery, suggesting that addressing these operations requires a comprehensive strategy encompassing both technological and human rights dimensions. Closely related to manipulative modus operandi, is escape and rescue of Trafficking in Persons (TIP) victims.

### ***Escape and Support Networks***

Some victims managed to escape their exploitative circumstances with the help of NGOs, according to the survivor narratives we analyzed. This is consistent with prior literature, which shows that individuals trapped in scamming compounds often sought assistance from brokers in countries like Bangladesh and Cambodia (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024a; United Nations 2023). Organizations such as the Global Anti-Scam Organization (GASO) played a crucial role in these efforts, helping victims escape after prolonged attempts (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024b). The involvement of these organizations provided essential relief and support, enabling victims to break free from their exploitative environments (Humanity Research Consultancy 2024c, 2024d).

Migration and Transnationalism perspectives provide valuable insights into the role of support networks in facilitating the escape and recovery of trafficked individuals. These theories emphasize the significance of transnational social spaces and global ties that connect migrants’ societies of origin and settlement, shaping the support mechanisms available to trafficked individuals (Faist 2000; Portes, 1997). Established diaspora and migrant communities in destination countries can either offer crucial support to newly arrived migrants or be exploited by traffickers to recruit and control victims. In this context, organizations like the Global Anti-Scam Organization (GASO) operate within these transnational social spaces, leveraging global networks to assist victims in their escape.

This pattern highlights the critical role of support networks in aiding trafficked individuals involved in cybercrime. Many qualitative research reports depict cybercriminals in West Africa (Abubakari and Blaszczyk 2023; Alhassan and Ridwan 2023; Button et al. 2024; Lazarus and Okolorie 2019; Soares and Lazarus 2024; Whittaker et al. 2025; Yushawu and Jaishankar 2025) and Western Europe (Bekkers and Leukfeldt 2022; Bekkers et al. 2023; Leukfeldt, Kleemans, and Stol 2017; Lusthaus et al. 2023) as voluntarily participating in criminal enterprises. In contrast, this study reveals a different scenario in Southeast Asia. While willing cybercriminals require raids, arrests, and prosecution, individuals coerced or trafficked into cybercriminal roles demand coordinated rescue efforts and secure pathways for escape. This distinction spotlights the unique nature of cybercrime and Trafficking in Persons (TIP) intersections, necessitating tailored responses that address the specific challenges of each context.

However, similar to the Southeast Asian phenomenon, Lazarus and Button (2024) and Lazarus and Soares (2025) found that cybercriminals from Anglophone West Africa are training others in various forms of cybercrime, including hacking, romance fraud, and

sextortion. This training occurs through informal educational institutions known as “Hustle Kingdoms” (cybercrime academies or scamming schools) (Lazarus and Soares 2025). Unlike their Southeast Asian counterparts, where coercion is a defining characteristic, participation in contemporary Hustle Kingdoms is generally voluntary. These networks trace their origins to the business centres of the 1980s, which served as precursors to modern cybercrime academies. Lazarus and Soares (2025) provide historical perspectives that illuminate this evolution. As these networks expand, they facilitate the growth of digital scams, leading to a rise in romance fraud and sextortion across North America, Oceania, the Arab world, and Europe (Lazarus and Button 2024; Lazarus and Soares 2025). As a result, public concern continues to grow. This trend suggests that cybercrime is becoming increasingly organised and operating on a larger scale.

Nonetheless, the transnational nature of these criminal networks complicates efforts to support victims. Traffickers exploit global disparities, restrictive migration policies, and weak law enforcement across borders, making it difficult for victims to access support (de Haas 2010; George, Tsourtos, and McNaughton 2018; Shelley 2012). Traffickers may use these networks to control and manipulate victims and exploit vulnerabilities created by restrictive immigration policies and socioeconomic inequalities. This situation underscores the need for global collaboration in developing effective support systems for trafficked individuals.

Similar to Friedman’s (2024) suggestion, our study demonstrates that NGOs and the private sector play pivotal roles in combating modern slavery by adopting ethical business practices that prioritize human rights protection. This case underscores the need for a comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach to dismantle the exploitative networks that force individuals into cybercrime. Collaboration between NGOs, civil society, and the private sector is essential for building effective support systems for victims. Moreover, Migration and Transnationalism perspectives indicate that interventions must address both the immediate needs of victims and the broader structural factors that facilitate trafficking. This includes dismantling transnational criminal networks, improving legal pathways for migration, and enhancing international cooperation to protect the rights of migrants and trafficking victims (de Haas 2010; Faist 2000). The interplay between escape and support networks highlights the urgent need for a nuanced understanding of how various contexts shape the experiences of trafficked individuals.

### ***Integration with existing literature and future implications***

This study extends the application of Migration and Transnationalism perspectives to shed light on the intersections between cybercrime and human trafficking. By doing so, it highlights the structural and systemic factors that enable human trafficking within digital spaces (cf. George, Tsourtos, and McNaughton 2018). While Wang (2024) focused on identity transformation in the “pig-butcher scam,” and George, Tsourtos, and McNaughton (2018) discussed the deceptive recruitment of victims into forced labor, our study explicitly examines the deceptive recruitment of victims into forced labor within cybercrime contexts through the lens of Migration and Transnationalism perspectives. Notably, unlike George, Tsourtos, and McNaughton (2018), whose focus was on offline victimization, our study focuses on the intersections between Trafficking in Persons (TIP) and cybercrime. By integrating direct victim testimonies with thematic analysis, we contribute to the scant empirical literature on cybercrime and human trafficking intersections. We also contribute to the understanding of the dynamics at play. By so doing, it provides valuable insights for future research and policy interventions. Migration and Transnationalism perspectives exploration here highlights the transnational aspect of the intersections between Trafficking in Persons (TIP) and cybercrime and the need for comprehensive interventions that address the immediate needs of victims while also dismantling the structural conditions that enable such exploitative practices to persist.



## Limitations

This study has two main limitations. First, the accuracy of this information may be compromised due to potential distortions in the victim's narrative, influenced by trauma, memory distortion, or self-preservation. Second, the study relies on a single victim. Similar to the broader fraud studies by Carter (2021), Marquart and Thompson (2024), and Lazarus (2024), this study lacks diverse perspectives, relying solely on the testimonies of a single victim regarding the intersections of human trafficking and cybercrime. However, Weitzer (2014) highlighted that conducting large-sample studies on human trafficking is challenging due to the difficulty of accessing participants involved in illegal activities, even after they have exited the trade. This absence of multiple or external viewpoints may have limited the comprehensiveness of the research findings.

## Conclusion

This study offers an in-depth exploration of human trafficking within the context of cybercrime, focusing on the deceptive recruitment practices, manipulative tactics, and exploitative conditions faced by victims in Cambodia. The thematic analysis of victim testimonies revealed six key themes: Deception and Recruitment, Manipulation and Control, Exploitation and Forced Labor, Trading and Movement, Scamming Methods, and Escape and Rescue. Victims were frequently deceived by false promises of lucrative employment, leading them into a cycle of coercion and control. Upon arrival, they faced numerous forms of manipulation, including visa deception and corruption at immigration points, further entrenched their vulnerability. The exploitative working conditions, characterized by unrealistic targets and severe punishments, were compounded by the enforced movement between high-security compounds, making any attempt at escape daunting and dangerous.

The findings also highlight the systematic training and use of sophisticated scamming methods, where victims were forced to create fake identities and engage in complex cyber scams. Despite these dire circumstances, some victims managed to escape with the critical assistance of NGOs such as the Global Anti-Scam Organization (GASO), emphasizing the indispensable role of support systems in combating these crimes and aiding victim recovery. While previous studies (e.g., Wang and Dickinson 2024) have examined the feedback mechanisms in online romance fraud and the industrialization of such scams, this study uniquely foregrounds the deceptive recruitment and coercion of victims into forced labor within cybercrime networks. Targeting individuals with specialized skills, such as the computer and engineering graduate featured in this research, adds a new dimension to our understanding of how traffickers exploit professional expertise to enhance their criminal operations.

Future research reports should continue to investigate the evolving tactics of cybercriminals and traffickers, focusing on the intersection between human trafficking and cybercrime. This should include a detailed examination of the various roles and strategies employed in scamming operations and the broader socio-political context that enables these activities. More research is critical to develop and evaluate targeted intervention mechanisms that can effectively disrupt these networks and provide holistic support for victims. The potential benefits of future research extend beyond theoretical contributions, offering practical implications for law enforcement, policy development, and victim support services. Certainly, addressing the interwoven and evolving challenges of trafficking in persons (TIP) and cybercrime requires multifaceted and context-sensitive responses. In particular, understanding the interactions between online job scams, human trafficking, and forced labor necessitate a holistic and interdisciplinary approach that considers social structures, cultural dynamics, and economic pressures. Integrating ethnographic inquiry, policy analysis, and community engagement is essential for unpacking these exploitative networks and fostering agency, resilience, and social justice for those affected.

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## Notes on contributors

**Dr Suleman Lazarus** holds all his university degrees from the UK, including a PhD in Cybercrime and Criminology from the University of Portsmouth. He is an Associate Editor for the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) journal, *Digital Threats: Research and Practice* and a Visiting Fellow at the Mannheim Centre for Criminology, London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE). Dr Lazarus developed the Tripartite Cybercrime Framework (TCF), classifying cybercrimes into socioeconomic, psychosocial, and geopolitical motivational groups. He has published extensively in peer-reviewed journals, including *Life Writing*, *Telematics and Informatics*, *Criminal Justice Studies*, *Deviant Behavior*, and *Current Issues in Criminal Justice*. His research primarily explores the intersection of cybercriminals and society across various contexts, such as Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, Cambodia, and the United Kingdom.

**Mrs Mina Chiang** is a sought-after expert in combating human trafficking, especially for her research in survivor empowerment, combating slavery in the scamming compounds in Southeast Asia, and ending forced labor in the fishing industry. Through her work, Mina offers technical advice to UN agencies, Interpol, governments, NGOs, and the private sector. She is an international speaker and has been interviewed by numerous media outlets, including CNN, the New York Times, and Sky News. Mina is the founder and Director of Humanity Research Consultancy (HRC), an award-winning social enterprise fighting against human trafficking by bringing in experts from the Global South. Her extensive research portfolio includes projects for organizations such as USAID, BIICL, RSO of the Bali Process, Humanity United, and Freedom Fund. She holds a Master's from the Institute of Development Studies.

**Professor Mark Button** is the Founder and Co-Director of the Centre for Cybercrime and Economic Crime at the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, University of Portsmouth. He holds a PhD from the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and is a leading authority on counter-fraud, online fraud, and private policing. Professor Button has authored numerous articles, book chapters, and ten books on these subjects. His extensive research portfolio includes projects for organizations such as the Home Office, National Fraud Authority, EPSRC, Sentencing Council, Midlands Fraud Forum, Crowe Clark Whitehill, and the United Nations.

## ORCID

Suleman Lazarus  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-1721-8519>

Mina Chiang  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-9416-959X>

Mark Button  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-4169-2619>

## Ethics

The data used is publicly available; ethical approval was not required.

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