

**Mental health experiences of sex trafficking victims in Western countries:  
A qualitative study**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, human trafficking has received increasing public awareness and media attention, and sex trafficking in particular has become a prevailing human rights issue on a global scale. Despite growing scientific literature in the field, there remains a limited number of international qualitative studies investigating victims' needs. This study aims to explore the experiences of people who have been sex trafficked in a Western country and how this impacted on their mental health, as described in online first-person accounts. First-person online narratives of sex trafficking victims (n=30) were retrieved from a systematic online search. A thematic analysis identified overarching themes, with the most prominent being 1) pre-existing vulnerabilities, 2) psychological mechanisms involved in trafficking (i.e. deception, manipulation), and 3) barriers to recovery. The results showed how pre-existing vulnerabilities can impact on victims' susceptibility to trafficking and how psychological control tactics utilized in the trafficking process maintain victims' vulnerability. The results of this thematic analysis provide insight into the diverse set of mental, social, and legal needs that trafficking victims face and may inform potential post-trafficking interventions to meet these needs and prevention efforts to reduce vulnerability to trafficking. Further implications and methodological considerations are discussed in full.

*Keywords:* human trafficking, sexual exploitation, mental health, intervention, abuse, trauma, qualitative, thematic analysis

## Introduction

Human trafficking is defined as the recruitment and transportation of individuals by force, coercion, or deception for the purposes of exploitation (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime [UNODC], 2004). According to the United Nations *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2018*, the most common forms of human trafficking are sexual exploitation and labor trafficking, which make up about 59% and 34% of trafficking forms, respectively. The report further states that of trafficking victims detected in 2016, 83% of women victims were trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation, and 82% of men victims were trafficked for the purposes of forced labor. Seventy-two percent of all detected victims were women and girls (UNODC, 2018).

Trafficking for sexual exploitation is the most common form of trafficking globally (International Labour Organization, 2005; UNODC, 2018). Sex trafficking is a form of modern-day slavery in which commercial sexual acts are induced by force, fraud, or coercion (National Institute of Justice, 2019). Normally involving extreme physical, sexual, and psychological abuse, sex trafficking often results in devastating mental health problems for the victims (U.S. Department of State, 2016). These mental health problems may include clinically diagnosable illnesses and/or personal mental health struggles like low self-esteem or feelings of shame (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Levine, 2017; Shandro et al., 2016). Furthermore, given that females are more often trafficked for sexual exploitation than males (Oram et al., 2016; UNODC, 2018), the majority of research in the field of sex trafficking focuses overwhelmingly on female survivors (Abas et al., 2013; Hossain et al., 2010; Kiss et al., 2015; Ottisova et al., 2016), with males being understudied.

Previous research has focused primarily on the prevalence of mental illness among female victims of sex trafficking. Interviews with 204 trafficked girls in post-trafficking settings suggested that injuries and sexual violence were associated with depression, anxiety, and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and that sexual violence alone was associated with higher levels of PTSD (Hossain et al., 2010). Other studies have also concluded that there is a high prevalence of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms among victims of sex trafficking (Abas et al., 2013; Hossain et al., 2010; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Kiss et al., 2015; Levine et al., 2017; Oram et al., 2016; Ottisova et al., 2016; Shandro et al., 2016). Risk factors such as childhood sexual abuse and post-trafficking unmet needs have also been shown to facilitate the development of mental illness among survivors (Abas et al., 2013; Ottisova et al., 2016). Existing literature affirms the connection between sex trafficking and diagnosable mental illness, often in terms of numerical prevalence and risk factors; this study more uniquely seeks to bring a richer understanding of the mental health impact of individual sex trafficking victims, as written in their own words. The hope is that by seeking to understand individual experiences in greater depth, novel ideas may emerge that could inform later intervention.

Tyldum (2010) suggests that the first step towards developing effective interventions is to assess overarching patterns in the needs of the population through qualitative, thematically focused studies. However, few existing studies employ exploratory methods to investigate victims' specific mental health needs. Studies have used qualitative methods to explore victims' encounters in health care settings (Baldwin et al., 2011), professionals' experiences of caring for victims (Domoney et al., 2015), as well as perceptions of traffickers themselves (Serie et al., 2018; Troshynski & Blank, 2008), but these do not directly pertain to victims' mental health needs. One exception to this is Gonzalez et al. (2019) who used qualitative methods to directly

assess victims' needs, concluding that financial support, independent living, and social services, in addition to psychological treatment, are imperative for full restoration and recovery. Though this study is the first of its kind, its sample was limited to only three sex trafficking victims from Midwest America. The field is therefore in need of more overarching, exploratory assessment of victims' needs, and a deeper qualitative analysis would be a fitting next step to develop effective psychological interventions for sex trafficking victims.

The sensitive nature of sex trafficking calls further for a different medium of resources that allows for personal narratives to be expressed. The Internet has become a growing space for individuals worldwide to not only disseminate knowledge or to look up health issues, but also to share experiences and to connect with others (Marcus et al., 2012). Therefore, the Internet may offer a unique way of accessing previously inaccessible narratives. A growing number of qualitative studies in the mental health field have also drawn on the Internet as a useful tool for studying online narratives (Clarke & van Amerom, 2008; Fleischmann & Fleischmann, 2012; Kotliar, 2016; Marcus et al., 2012; Mandla et al., 2017; Robinson, 2001; Salzman-Erikson & Hiçdurmaz, 2017). As opposed to observations and interviews, the Internet provides a safe, anonymous environment for people to tell their stories without the pressure of meeting expectations from researchers or fear of judgment (Clarke & van Amerom, 2008; Kotliar, 2016). According to Robinson (2001), online narratives are presented with a powerful "depth of feeling" often left out in more typical forms of communications, including those involving face-to-face interactions. The Internet allows people to carefully select their words and present them in a way that they believe reflects their experiences. Thus, with regards to a topic as sensitive as sex trafficking, utilizing online spaces to search for survivors' personally written accounts is a useful first step towards retrieving raw and powerful insights into their problems and needs.

There are, however, a number of inherent limitations (i.e. authenticity) to be considered whilst conducting Internet research. It is therefore important that data analysis and interpretation of online sources be performed within a critical context which bears in mind these possible limitations. The limitations of Internet research are later acknowledged and discussed in full. Nonetheless, in the absence of a body of research exploring sex trafficking victims' experiences, the use of Internet research offers an ideal starting point for considering the potential mental health impacts of this experience.

Furthermore, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) reports important geographical differences among trafficking worldwide. Regional differences involve nationality of victims and traffickers, gender discrepancies, type of exploitation, and existing legislation on trafficking. These geographical regions can be more readily grouped and culturally understood as "Western" and "non-Western," where Western regions typically include the United States, Canada, Australasia, and Western Europe (referring to countries with Roman Catholic/Protestant backgrounds i.e. United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, etc.) and non-Western regions typically include Asia and the Pacific. One key regional difference in the nature of trafficking is that Western regions usually have more foreign traffickers and anti-trafficking legislation in place, while non-Western regions have a greater number of national offenders and women and children victims (UNODC, 2018). There may therefore be a valuable geographical distinction for further research between Western and non-Western countries. Currently, the majority of sex trafficking research focuses primarily on trafficking within non-Western countries such as Nepal, Mexico, Moldova, and India (Abas et al., 2013; Jiménez et al., 2019; Kiss et al., 2015; Lee, 2005; Oram et al., 2012; Rimal & Papadopoulos, 2016; Silverman et al., 2011). In Ottisova et al. (2016)'s systematic review on prevalence outcomes for trafficked individuals, just four of the 31 studies

reviewed were conducted in Western countries (one in the US, two in the UK, and one in Italy), while the vast majority (18) were conducted in South and Southeast Asia. Therefore, trafficking within Western countries, such as the US and UK, is vastly underrepresented in current literature and would be a valuable geographical region for further study (Logan et al., 2009).

The present study used a thematic analysis of first-hand online accounts of sex trafficking victims from Western countries. Specifically, this study aimed to explore the experiences of people who have been sex trafficked in a Western country and how this impacted on their mental health, as described in online first-person accounts. It is important to note that the term ‘victim’ is used to refer to trafficked individuals, as opposed to ‘survivor.’ While positive labels are preferable, the term ‘survivor’ implies that the individuals have emerged and/or are recovered from trafficking, which would be a broad and unwarranted assumption. Instead, the term ‘victim’ more objectively identifies them as victims *of* something, in this case, sex trafficking. Lastly, given the possible limitations of Internet research, this study aims to strike a balance between interpreting these Internet narratives with caution and attending carefully to the mental health experiences described.

## **Method**

### **Sample & Data Collection**

A qualitative thematic analysis was performed on 30 readily accessible sex trafficking victim accounts retrieved online. Due to the highly personal nature of trafficking experiences, this study sought to achieve authenticity of sources by focusing on first-person accounts. This included both personal narratives published publicly by the victim themselves and websites, such as news or non-profit organization (NPO) websites, which cited direct speech from an individual victim. Based on current research gaps in the field, this study focused on trafficking within

Western countries, including the United States, Canada, Australia and Western Europe. Given that this field of literature is relatively new and that trafficking accounts are already scarce in nature, demographic inclusion and exclusion criteria were deliberately kept broad. Accounts were eligible for inclusion if they met the following criteria:

1. The accounts pertained specifically to victims of sex trafficking as defined earlier.
2. The accounts were written in the first person by the victim themselves, or were from online sources which cited a significant proportion of direct speech from the victim.
3. The accounts described trafficking that occurred in a Western country.

To select victim accounts for analysis, electronic searches were conducted on Google between December 2016 and May 2017. For the purpose of authenticity, search terms were chosen using predicted phrases that a lay person would be likely to use in order to gather personal accounts of a particular experience (Mandla et al., 2017). In this case, search terms were directed towards retrieving sex trafficking experiences and included: “human trafficking experiences,” “human trafficking stories,” “human trafficking accounts,” “human trafficking victim accounts,” “human trafficking first hand accounts,” “sex trafficking experiences,” “sex trafficking stories,” “sex trafficking accounts,” “sex trafficking victim accounts,” and “sex trafficking first hand accounts.” Search terms were selected by the primary researcher and verified by two senior qualitative researchers in the field. Details such as location were not specified in the initial search in order not to place a greater limit on the results generated. Rather, the strategy aimed to start with the broadest search possible and examine further eligibility criteria manually. Similarly, lay terms such as “accounts” and “stories” were used, as opposed to professional terms such as “narratives.” This was to keep sources as commonplace as possible,

whereas professional terms may have generated ethnographic accounts possibly influenced by researcher bias.

Titles of the first 50 results for each search were scanned for relevancy. Search results stopped including key words and became irrelevant generally after the first 30 results. Thus, the first 30 results for each search were retrieved and assessed for eligibility, generating a total of 300 results. A total of 210 duplicate results were removed. The remaining 90 results were inspected using the inclusion criteria stated above, as well as the following exclusion criteria: (a) they recounted experiences of sex trafficking of a group and not of a specific individual; (b) they detailed accounts of voluntary prostitution, not trafficking, which by nature is involuntary; (c) they were not in English and/or had been translated from another language, and (d) they came from scientific literature, guided interviews, or audio/video clips. This was to limit bias by keeping sources homogenous and by restricting the variability of intended audiences—for example, scientific literature is written towards academic professionals for the purposes of research, while this study aimed to retrieve sources directed at lay persons for the purposes of personal authenticity. No restrictions were placed on the date, gender of the author, or length of the account. In the case that there was one source providing multiple accounts, all were assessed for eligibility.

After screening, 26 search results were eligible for inclusion, 25 of which contained a single individual account, and one of which contained five, separate eligible accounts. These accounts were then added into the total number of eligible accounts, forming a final sample of 30 accounts eligible for analysis (see Figure 1). Of these 30 accounts, 11 were first-person accounts written by victims themselves, and 19 were written from a third-person perspective citing a

significant proportion of victims' direct speech. Most of these came from NPO websites and media websites, such as news sites.

Ethical approval was deemed unnecessary given that all accounts gathered were publicly available online and therefore did not require authors' informed consent (Eastham, 2011; Hookway, 2008; Wilkinson & Thelwall, 2010). Individual victims mentioned in all accounts were already anonymized so no risks are posed to any victims mentioned.

### **Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations. Previous research indicates that under-researched fields would benefit from an inductive approach, where analysis is not driven by any pre-existing theoretical framework, preconceptions, or assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Joffe & Yardley, 2004; Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Therefore, given the lack of research in this field, the current analysis adopted an inductive, data-driven approach, allowing for codes and themes to emerge where relevant (Boyatzis, 1998; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). Braun & Clarke (2006) further posit that under-researched fields would benefit from analysis that aims to provide a rich description of the data set as a whole, rather than a detailed account of one particular aspect. Thus, this analysis sought to provide a rich, overall description of the sample, in order to give a general sense of the predominant themes across the data set.

All data was first printed and read through several times for the purposes of data familiarization and immersion. Data immersion refers to a 'repeated reading' of the data in an active manner, searching for meanings and patterns, and allowing for familiarity with both the depth and breadth of the content (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen,

2018; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). During two of the later readings, annotation was conducted manually, where initial notes and ideas were marked down prior to the formal coding process.

The following stage of analysis involved generation of initial codes. Initial codes were first generated manually and then inputted digitally using NVivo qualitative data analysis software. Out of the 30 accounts, five accounts were selected to develop the initial coding frame. This was thought to be the minimal and most feasible number of accounts to begin with, whilst also being large enough to begin to provide some overview of important emerging themes. These five accounts were selected based on location, length, and relevance to the research question, and were deemed to capture key aspects of diversity within the data set. Using these selected accounts, line by line coding was performed and a provisional coding frame was generated. This coding frame was developed and refined as the remaining 25 accounts were analyzed. This process involved looking for commonalities in reference to the provisional coding frame, while simultaneously allowing for new ideas and exceptions to emerge (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Joffe & Yardley, 2004). In keeping with Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendations, codes were generated wherever there was a potential for possible themes or patterns, and data extracts were coded for inclusively, meaning surrounding data was also coded for in order to preserve the context of each situation. Throughout the coding process, data was coded for inductively and iteratively. Codes were reviewed, refined, and adapted in a cyclical process, and the emerging coding frame was continuously reviewed and discussed among the researchers. Coding was concluded at the point of data saturation, when further coding no longer produced new information.

The subsequent stage of analysis involved searching for themes based on the codes identified. This involved a broader analysis of the codes at the thematic level, where the

relationship between codes, themes, and possible sub-themes was considered and different codes were sorted into potential themes and sub-themes. Provisional themes were then reviewed and refined at two levels. First, at the smaller level, coded extracts within each theme were re-read and assessed for a consistent pattern; the existence of a coherent pattern indicated that each individual theme itself was an accurate representation of the ideas within it (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Second, the themes were reviewed at the broader level of the data set, which involved considering whether the themes together formed an accurate representation of the meanings within the data set as a whole (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Final themes were grouped into three chronological categories—before, during, and after trafficking—in accordance with Corbin & Strauss (2008), who stress the importance of looking at the structure and timing of the narrative as a qualitative analytic tool. This is especially relevant to the present study because the structure and order of events within each victim narrative may point to the location and significance of these events on their life timelines (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Lastly, final themes were defined and named. Specific theme headings were informed by original data extracts in order to retain and reflect the true essence of each theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### **Reflexivity**

As described by Braun & Clarke (2019), thematic analysis is “actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic ‘work,’ and subjectivity.” Rather than passively emerging from the data, themes are actively constructed through the researchers’ reflective and thoughtful engagement with both the data and analytic processes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2019; Clarke & Braun, 2018; Gough & Madill, 2012). As such, we find it fitting and necessary to

engage in the process of personal reflexivity, where we will elaborate upon the prior motivations, assumptions, and values that may have informed our current analysis.

First, it would be helpful to shed some more light on our individual backgrounds. At the time of conducting the research, I, Cassandra, was an MSc student enrolled in University College London's Clinical Mental Health Sciences program in the UK, with a particular interest in trauma and abuse. My supervisor and co-author of the current paper, Dr. Jo Billings, is a Consultant Clinical Psychologist specializing in PTSD and trauma, with over 20 years of clinical experience in the UK. She is also an associate clinical professor at UCL, with extensive experience in qualitative methods, including the teaching and supervision of qualitative research.

My motivations for choosing this topic can be attributed to personal experiences related to mental health and abuse. My interest in trauma stemmed from my own personal experience of the recovery process, with a specific interest in factors that promote resilience. Furthermore, I was specifically interested in the narrative aspect of experience; as I personally found journaling and writing very helpful in my healing, I was keen on discovering narratives of other individuals experiencing trauma, and the use of writing and storytelling as a means of sharing experiences.

Given my experiences and interest in this topic, I am aware that my prior values, assumptions, and other subjectivities may have impacted on data collection, interpretation, and analysis, and fully acknowledge my role in the shaping and outcome of this research. As a second-generation Asian-American, I was able to relate strongly to feelings of being a minority, and especially to one Korean victim, who expressed her feelings about others' expectations and the exoticization of Asian cultures. I also empathized strongly with several immigrant victims, who described their aspirations of coming to a new country as a minority, only to be let down, reminding me of the difficult journey my own parents encountered immigrating to the US. My

ethnic background, therefore, may have influenced the data by making me more prone to noticing minority and immigrant experiences. In addition, in light of my personal experiences of trauma and depression, there is the possibility that I was more likely to highlight, code, and quote experiences that I felt I related to most. Similarly, given my own prior interest in resilience and recovery, it is possible I may have selectively attended to these in the data.

As I was aware of my own personal biases throughout the research, I closely followed Braun & Clarke's (2006) recommendations for good thematic analysis, paying particular attention to the data familiarization and coding processes, doing my best to pay equal attention to all the narratives and the ideas within. Dr. Billings closely supervised these stages alongside me, providing guidance and validity checks throughout the analysis process.

Ultimately, I recognize that my subjective experiences may have influenced the constructing and writing of this research, acknowledge my active role as a researcher in this analysis, and invite the reader to read more accounts of sex trafficking victims' stories firsthand.

## **Results**

The sample consisted of 30 individual sex trafficking victim accounts, retrieved from 26 different websites. Although no restrictions were placed on gender during the search, all accounts gathered were written by female victims, which is in line with the greater prevalence of sex trafficking of females (Oram et al., 2016; UNODC, 2018). All victims were trafficked within Western countries. The distribution of countries in which trafficking occurred is as follows: Australia (n=1), Canada (n=4), Germany (n=1), United Kingdom (n=2), United States (n=22). The ethnicity of trafficking victims was diverse and not always stated in the account. All accounts are numbered from A1-A30 and cited as such in any referenced quotations. See Table 1 for information regarding data sources and specific authors.

A total of nine themes were identified from analysis, organized into three broader, chronological categories: before trafficking, during trafficking, and after trafficking. See Table 2 for an overview of themes and key points.

### **Category 1: Before Trafficking**

#### ***Theme 1: Vulnerabilities – ‘That Vulnerability Was Already There...the Trafficker Plays on That’***

Mentions of pre-existing vulnerabilities prior to trafficking arose frequently in the data. These were experiences that individuals thought made them more vulnerable to being trafficked and/or to suffering the psychological effects of trafficking. Five main vulnerabilities were identified: a dysfunctional family background, involvement in destructive relationships, existing mental health problems, previous sexual abuse, and being an immigrant.

The most commonly mentioned vulnerability was having come from a dysfunctional family. These were households characterized by parental conflict, drug/alcohol abuse, and most frequently, childhood abuse and/or neglect.

*“There are always men waiting for the girl whose father keeps hitting her or coming into her room at night, or whose mother is not present, or drunk, or high. These men often give them the first hope of love and protection they’ve ever had.” (A29)*

Destructive relationships were the second most common vulnerability mentioned. These were relationships developed outside of the family, including those with friends, significant others, or strangers, in which some form of emotional or physical abuse occurred. The formation of these relationships was directly related to problems in the household, where childhood neglect often resulted in children or young teenagers running away from home, being taken into youth care, or ending up on the streets, paving the way for dangerous ‘friends’ or strangers to enter their lives.

Such relationships made individuals easy targets and provided an opportunity for further psychological abuse.

*“The older girl who befriended Aubrey showered her with all of the attention, praise and understanding that a 16-year-old with a father in prison and a mother on drugs so deeply craved. Long-festering emotional gaps were finally filled. And so Aubrey didn’t notice when more and more of her life began to revolve around the new friend, or when she increasingly became isolated from anyone besides that older girl. Then came the invitation, at an especially low point in Aubrey’s relationship with her mother: ‘Come live with my family...’ The [older girl’s] mother’s boyfriend was a pimp who ran an escort service. Aubrey’s new friend had herself been lured into prostitution. Aubrey was their latest target...” (A20)*

Existing mental health problems, such as body image issues, low self-esteem, and drug abuse, were also mentioned as risk factors for exploitation by traffickers. A need for validation and no family or friends to provide it resulted in girls seeking validation from an outside figure, often times an older, wealthier man.

*“I had very low esteem and body image issues so I found it exhilarating that men chose me.” (A5)*

Previous sexual abuse also appeared to play a role in later sex trafficking. Victims mentioned being sexually abused, some by their fathers and relatives, and others by family friends or people they met in foster homes. Of these individuals, not all elaborated on how sexual abuse may have affected their future outcomes. However, two accounts (A1, A8) stated that previous sexual abuse normalized their experiences in trafficking later on. In particular, they described feelings of being desensitized to abuse and it being normal to them. Previous sexual abuse appeared to

impact individuals' vulnerability to the effects of trafficking by decreasing self-esteem and clouding any ability to distinguish between normal and abnormal, right and wrong.

*“My childhood was not a childhood. In my family, men had sex with little girls. It was our normal. It was our culture and it was generational. My parents grew up with it. Their parents grew up with it.” (A8)*

Lastly, being an immigrant seemed to make girls more vulnerable to trafficking. A few victims described emigrating to the US with promises of a new job and hopes of a better future. The reality, however, was that they were deceived into trafficking, and with traffickers confiscating their identification documents, had very little means of escaping.

In addition to describing the actual vulnerabilities, girls frequently mentioned the keen ability of traffickers to specifically select individuals with the most vulnerabilities. They described traffickers as “preying” upon the weakest. This ability to weed out vulnerabilities is essential to understanding how victims end up trafficked and how their vulnerabilities may exacerbate its effects.

*“We [My boyfriend/trafficker and I] were going to ride off into the sunset.... Coming from brokenness—I had two parents but they were dysfunctional—that vulnerability was already there. And the trafficker plays on that. They can sniff it out.” (A19)*

*“‘Predators will adapt their means to whatever the young people are doing -- whether it's malls, whether it's ski slopes, whether it's beaches,’ Burrus [FBI Deputy Assistant Director] said. ‘Predators ... are going to do everything in their power to try to convince young girls, young boys, to come with them and enter this particular lifestyle.’” (A13)*

**Theme 2: Barriers to Escape – ‘I Tried so Hard for so Long...There Was Nothing Else’**

Some individuals were already involved in the sex industry prior to being trafficked.

These individuals described reasons for entering and/or remaining in the sex industry, despite not wanting to, and factors they felt were acting as barriers to escaping while they still could. There was one such factor which arose from the data: money.

Money appeared to be the primary factor that lured some girls into working in non-reputable industries, such as in prostitution or in massage parlors. These industries often maintained a façade of normality at first, but then spiraled into exploitation and abuse. Money was therefore the main reason some individuals stayed in these jobs for as long as they did before becoming trapped.

*“I entered into the industry fresh out of high school, escorting independently while working and going to college. I was curious, adventurous, and generally hungry for soaking in new life experiences. The thought of doing that AND making money was a no-brainer for me at 18. Shortly after I started to escort, I met a guy who introduced me to meth. It was an incredibly abusive and violent relationship, and I quickly became dependent on both him and the drugs, so much so that I was unable to function on any level. My life started to crumble a bit, so I dropped out of school and the industry for a while. I essentially dropped out of life.” (A11)*

In most cases, individuals described needing money to support their child or to simply survive.

*“One ad caught her eye: ‘Masseuse wanted.’ ... Normally, Olga would have skipped past it, but not this time—it was her last option. ‘I tried so hard for so long to survive. There was nothing else.’” (A27)*

The massage parlor that Olga then went to interview for turned out to be a commercial sex parlor, where men asked for sexual acts rather than just massages.

*“I didn’t want to go there. I wanted to leave. All the time, I wanted to leave,” Olga said. But she also felt they wouldn’t let her. They would have kept calling her until she ran out of options again. She was still ‘the new girl’ and coming only a few times a week. The other girls were probably controlled more tightly. ‘You’ve got to get out of here. Why do you stay here?’ she said to the other girls. They told her they needed the money, or that they could make more money there than anywhere else.” (A27)*

Factors that encourage individuals to enter or remain in the industry are important because while individuals may feel they have control at first, these situations frequently deteriorate into an inescapable pattern of control and abuse. In addition, feeling pressured to do something despite hating it may lead to cognitive dissonance, increased stress, and decreased mental health such as depression. Overall, a need for money acted as a barrier to escape, pressuring individuals to put themselves into dangerous situations.

## **Category 2: During Trafficking**

### ***Theme 3: Deception and Manipulation – ‘It Was a Promise Built on Another Lie’***

‘Deception and manipulation’ was identified as the third theme, consisting of comments about traffickers using lies as a way of manipulating their victims. Victims spoke of deception and manipulation as the primary means by which traffickers reeled them into their grasps. While manipulation refers to the act of intentionally altering or exploiting others, deception is a method of manipulation through lying (Buss, 1987). Deception occurred in four main ways, all of which involved false or short-lived promises. These included promises of a loving relationship, a new job, luxurious goods, and basic survival needs.

The most common form of deception involved convincing the victim that a meaningful, loving relationship existed between her and her trafficker, described by Buss (1987) as the “charm tactic.” In reality, however, it was just the opposite.

*“She had no idea the ‘instant connection’ she felt would lead to months of brainwashing — or how long it would take for her to realize the man prostituting her out of hotel rooms wasn’t really her ‘boyfriend.’ ‘He made me feel special. I never wanted to leave him... I was in love with him. I thought I was going to be with him for the rest of my life.’” (A25)*

Two other notable forms of deception mentioned were promises of a new job or of luxurious material goods, such as cars, jewelry, or expensive clothing. Many times, the traffickers carried out their promises, treating their victims like queens as a means of winning their trust. The fourth form of deception identified simply involved promises of basic survival needs such as shelter, food, and clothes. One victim described this stage of deception as the grooming or “honeymoon stage.”

*“That’s what we call the honeymoon stage, basically treating you like a princess and doing everything he can for you and taking care of all your needs and it escalates from there.” (A16)*

After having gained victims’ trust, traffickers would then begin the process of manipulation—using this trust to control them, emotionally, psychologically, and physically.

*“‘They start slow with them, then they begin to gain emotional and psychological control over them, asking them to start doing things and then the threats become involved and coercion becomes involved,’ Stucker [Metropolitan Bureau of Investigations] said.” (A18)*

Many accounts testified to the expertise of traffickers when it comes to gaining control over a girl. One victim said she knew a trafficker who went to community college to take a psychology class specifically to control his girls, seeing it simply as an investment of time (A2). However, relationships between traffickers and their victims were collectively described as being multi-layered and complex, creating further complications in deciphering them.

Deception and manipulation lead to serious psychological consequences, such as trust issues, low self-esteem, and intense psychological distress. Discounting the physical and sexual abuse, simply the emotional and psychological control was enough to send victims plummeting into depression or an utter sense of hopelessness.

*“I went from thinking I was in the first loving relationship of my life with a guy who treated me like a queen, to becoming an addict and being sold by him to supply his drug habit,” she says. ‘And then he sold me again for financial gain to a known gang that put me on the streets and took me to the darkest point in my life.’” (A29)*

#### ***Theme 4: Establishment of Control – ‘He Took Ownership of Me’***

Establishment of control emerged as a fourth theme, and included descriptions of other means, apart from deception, by which traffickers reinforced and finalized their control over the victims. Four control tactics were identified: physical and sexual abuse, forced drug use, threats, and theft. The most commonly mentioned method of establishing control was physical and sexual abuse. Physical abuse most commonly occurred via beatings, though a few victims also described being branded, or tattooed, on their skin with a branding iron. Several victims described how they adapted quickly to the demands and behavior of their traffickers, knowing exactly how to act in which situations in order to avoid further abuse. This suggested that traffickers’ establishment of control was effective.

*“She remembers being forced to watch those men tie another young woman to a chair and beat her. The beating was a warning: She’d get the same if she tried to run.” (A14)*

Furthermore, there were numerous references of traffickers forcing drugs on their victims in order to enforce compliance. Drugs were used to make sexual abuse more bearable or to induce psychedelic effects that would make victims indifferent to what was happening.

*“These brothels were like normal houses on the outside and discos on the inside, with flashing lights and loud music. Cocaine, crystal meth and weed were laid out on the tables. The traffickers made me take drugs at gunpoint, and maybe it helped make it all bearable.” (A12)*

A third control tactic that was mentioned was coercion through the use of threats. A few victims described traffickers threatening to kill them or to hurt their loved ones. One victim stated specifically that her traffickers threatened to throw battery acid on her 19-month-old niece (A13). Lastly, theft was also mentioned—several immigrant victims explicitly stated that their traffickers stole their identification documents from them in order to prevent escape.

The aftermath of these actions on the victims was evident in the way they described their changed identities. Specifically, objectification appeared to have the most detrimental effect on victims’ mental health. For some, this resulted in low self-esteem and self-worth, where they believed that they were just objects undeserving of basic human rights.

*“We were constantly paraded before a potential client; their lustful eyes examining and perusing us before we became final choices for each predatory customer.” (A7)*

Other psychological consequences of traffickers' control techniques included increased likelihood of substance misuse disorders and PTSD. For example, repeatedly watching others be

physically beaten and raped and experiencing it themselves may have made victims prone to experiencing flashbacks and nightmares later on.

***Theme 5: Internalization – ‘I Didn’t Feel Like I Deserved to Live’***

Internalization of abuse in victims arose as a prominent theme. Internalization is defined as “the nonconscious mental process by which the characteristics, beliefs, feelings, or attitudes of other individuals or groups are assimilated into the self and adopted as one’s own” (VandenBos, 2007). This may also include the adoption of a set of norms and values, which are typically established by others through a social context. In this study, the theme ‘internalization of abuse’ consisted of: (1) mention of desensitization and/or normalization of abuse, and as a result, (2) mention of negatively altered self-perception. First, victims overwhelmingly described becoming desensitized to the abuse and starting to see it as normal in everyday life.

*“A normal day was just something I was merely trying to survive. Every day was ‘unnormal’ in what I was doing, but when you are a part of that lifestyle it is what everyone is doing so it starts to become ‘normal.’ The violence becomes normal, the derogatory names men call you become normal, the feelings of self-loathing and such become normal...which is why I guess the drinking, drugs and dysfunctional relationships became normal.” (A2)*

Internalization appeared to be a crucial stage that mediated the relationship between all the exploitation before it – deception, manipulation, control, abuse – and the psychological effects that occurred afterwards. One victim described how she became desensitized to the abuse and pain and was consequently unable to tell right from wrong. She failed to question anything that her trafficker was doing, believing that this was simply her fate, who she was as a person, and what she deserved.

*“Laura didn’t wonder why the outside world — white-collared men, rappers, neighbors, and town car drivers — either overlooked what DJ did or, often, helped him do it. She didn’t find it upsetting, or even odd, that people saw pimps like DJ as hard-knocks heroes — and women like Laura as property. Survival instinct and delusion subdued any impulse to question DJ’s perverted version of the truth.” (A21)*

Second, as a result of desensitization and normalization of abuse, many victims described negatively altered self-perceptions, involving a damaged sense of self-worth, self-esteem, and self-identity. For example, being constantly objectified lead some victims into truly believing their worth equated to that of an object’s. Several described having difficulty identifying as a victim, blaming themselves instead for their situation. As a result, feelings of self-blame, worthlessness, guilt, shame, and apathy became engraved into their core beliefs, making them more susceptible to mental health disorders such as depression.

*“I remember the moment when I realized there was no hope of being saved from this terrible life.” (A8)*

*“Fear consumed her. ‘I don’t know how to put it in words. It’s as if my soul sank to the very bottom,’ she said.” (A27)*

*“If someone had given me a condom I wouldn’t have had the self-esteem to use one. I didn’t feel like I deserved to live or not get a disease.” (A5)*

### **Category 3: After Trafficking**

#### ***Theme 6: Mental Health Consequences – ‘Living in the Hell of Memories’***

Multiple mental health disorders arose as a result of trafficking, the most common being depression and PTSD. However, not all mental health problems were described as being a diagnosable disorder; some victims simply mentioned experiencing a variety of atypical

symptoms. Depression was characterized mainly by feelings of hopelessness, loneliness, and a loss of purpose in life. One victim described feelings of having lost her soul (A14), while another seemed to have accepted that happiness will always elude her (A12).

*“Repeatedly, I witnessed the beatings, rapes and murders of innocent women. At times, my tears of hopelessness would drown me into a pathos of my own execution.” (A7)*

Apart from depression, victims collectively described their experiences of trauma as manifesting in PTSD. Flashbacks, nightmares, and triggers were common among victims.

*“I still get flashbacks, all the time. The smell of whisky makes me retch and if I hear certain ringtones - the ones my traffickers had - my body stiffens with fear. Faces in a crowd terrify me - they jump out, familiar for an instant, and I go to pieces. Spend any time with me and you will see me fiddling nervously with the ring on my finger to calm myself down.” (A12)*

Several talked of experiences of dissociation or amnesia, where the trauma was too significant to cope with consciously. As a result of their traumatic experiences, many victims experienced an inability to move on and an overwhelming numbness towards life.

*“I compare that time to being held hostage in a timeless existence where my mind engaged itself in disassociation with my soul. This mental state was the only way in which I could keep any sanity.” (A7)*

Lastly, not all mental health problems that were described fit into a diagnostic category; many simply described atypical symptoms relevant to multiple diagnoses, such as guilt, amnesia, or general anxiety. Other mental health consequences prevalent throughout the data included substance misuse issues as well as suicide.

Of all mental health problems mentioned, depression and PTSD appeared to be the most severely disabling and often prevented a return to normal life. Not all victims, however, described having such issues, and one victim explicitly stated that she had not suffered any mental health problems after her trafficking experience (A30). It also appeared that the personal context of an individual's trafficking experience, such as duration and severity of abuse, was likely to directly impact the development of any mental health problems.

***Theme 7: Barriers to Societal Reentry – ‘Rescued, but Still Outcast’***

Many victims reflected upon the struggle of recovery. This theme consisted of any issues which victims described as preventing them from full recovery and societal reintegration. Two notable issues were identified: stigma and logistical issues. Many victims mentioned stigma as part of their battle towards recovery. There seemed to be some unanimous frustration and anger at society for viewing prostitutes as criminals rather than as victims. This, they said, was the cause for so much stigma and misunderstanding between the public and the truth behind trafficking. These victims wanted people to understand that girls did not enter the industry out of their own desire, but rather out of necessity or coercion, especially because there is a demand for it. All of these reasons contributed to the stigma and shame girls felt whilst trying to reintegrate into society, ultimately stunting their recovery. They overwhelmingly expressed a longing to be accepted but failed to do so.

*“The stigma regarding SW [sex work] I’d internalized haunted me. The socially induced shame I’d adopted ate at me.... I threw myself into church life ... All it did was remind me of just how different I felt, how outcast I still felt within my community, and how unsafe my emotional and spiritual environment was.” (A11)*

Another issue that arose as a barrier to societal re-entry was simply an issue of logistics. For example, being undocumented, having a record tainted with prostitution offenses, and lacking resources were all issues that girls faced. This prevented them from even starting their recovery process. Despite desperately wanting to recover, these issues kept them trapped in a cycle of suffering.

*“All are in recovery, still getting clean. None, apart from Jennifer, have managed to find work, thanks to histories of substance abuse and convictions for soliciting.” (A29)*

***Theme 8: Facilitators of Recovery – ‘The Biggest Thing Was Having People Who Understood’***

Victims also described resources that helped them to recover. Three facilitators of recovery arose from the data: counseling, general support, and security. Counseling was the most commonly mentioned method of intervention. However, the majority of the data simply stated that the victim had counseling, and few talked about the outcome of the counseling. Many stated that the victim continued to struggle, but this may have been due to the close proximity of time between when the event occurred and when the account was written.

*“Jones is now in sexual abuse counseling and continues to struggle with relieving herself of her pain and finding a way to heal. But Jones continues to blame herself for being stupid, foolish, and irresponsible.” (A26)*

One account stated explicitly that counseling had been helpful in her recovery.

*“‘They gave me a family when I felt alone,’ she said. ‘I have had tremendous healing during the last four years. It’s amazing what can happen when people are behind you, they believe you and believe in you.’” (A22)*

Although counseling was most commonly mentioned, victims described having general support as being most effective. Many expressed that having someone to talk to or someone who

understood their situation helped them the most, and those who did not have that support longed for it.

*“Without the unbelievable support of my family and of friends, I wouldn’t have been able to get through all of this.” (A3)*

Individuals also mentioned establishing security, such as securing financial stability and physical safety, as jumpstarts to recovery. Agencies, churches, schools, and residential programs were mentioned as places facilitating recovery, as they often provide opportunity for counseling, extra support, and security.

***Theme 9: Positive Outcomes – ‘They Thought They Could Break Me, yet I am Still Standing’***

Lastly, a theme of positive outcomes arose among the data. About one-third of individuals described positive outlooks and outcomes of their experiences. Three positive outcomes were identified: individuals viewed their experiences as a reminder of strength, demonstrated resiliency following trafficking, and better understood their own self-worth. It was very common, first, to find individuals who viewed their experiences as a reminder of strength for future hardships.

*“‘Being a survivor means I just went through an ordeal, thriving means I have gone through the ordeal and I am surviving past that,’ she said. ‘Transcending is when it is no longer part of my life, it’s a backdrop of who I am but it doesn’t rule me. That is where I am now.’” (A22)*

Furthermore, a small number of the accounts talked specifically about resiliency following trafficking. They were able to start over, looking towards a life of hope rather than a life of despair, viewing themselves no longer as victims, but as survivors who can help others overcome the same ordeal.

*“I long to reach out to those who are still imprisoned in the revolving door of sexual exploitation. Truly, their shackles can be broken by people who are willing to tear down the walls of silence, and offer them the hope of freedom. They robbed me of five years, they thought they could break me. Yet, I am still standing and I will stand and voice my experience for the victims who are still held in captive of human trafficking.” (A7)*

Finally, as opposed to the lack of self-worth many individuals expressed before and during trafficking, many expressed a final understanding of their true self-worth after recovery. The internalization of abuse appeared to be reversed, and many understood that women are not commodities or objects, but rather humans with choices that deserve better.

*“I had to learn that if I don’t at least have some kind of love and value for myself, no one ever will. My advice to other girls would be to let people help you. It’s not your fault and you didn’t deserve it.” (A6)*

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to identify overarching themes regarding the experiences of sex trafficking victims and the impact of these experiences on mental health. In general, individuals described a wide range of experiences across multiple domains before, during, and after trafficking. Vulnerability appeared to play an important role in predisposing victims to trafficking and its effects. General feelings of self-worthlessness, guilt, and hopelessness dominated the data, and poor mental health outcomes were apparent in individuals post-trafficking. We identified three main conclusions.

### **Main Conclusions**

#### ***The Role of Vulnerability***

Pre-existing vulnerabilities appeared to have an impact on the means and depths of trafficking. Previous studies investigating risk factors for mental disorders in survivors of trafficking found that a significant percentage of trafficking victims reported childhood sexual abuse (Abas et al., 2013; Fedina et al., 2019; Hardy et al., 2013; Hossain et al., 2010; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Kiss et al., 2015). The current study supported these findings, with family-related childhood sexual and physical abuse being the most common form of vulnerability described. Previous mental health problems also arose as a possible vulnerability factor for trafficking and later mental health problems. This supports previous research indicating that many sex trafficking victims come from families with higher prevalence of mental health problems such as depression and substance abuse (Levine, 2017). Existing mental health problems in victims or in victims' family members may be especially important because this means they may be genetically predisposed to developing later disorders, for example, when exposed to stress or abuse (Ehlert, 2013; Levine, 2017; Serafini et al., 2015). The current study also supports previous findings that immigrants are more susceptible to trafficking, often because they are deceived into false hopes and job contracts (Logan et al., 2009; Shandro et al., 2016).

There appeared to be a distinction between vulnerability factors that made individuals more susceptible to being trafficked and those that made individuals more susceptible to trafficking-induced mental illness. On one hand, victims described poor family relationships and dysfunctional homes as putting them in a vulnerable position in their lives. These findings support previous research suggesting that a number of risk factors, including domestic violence and childhood physical abuse, may increase susceptibility to victimization later on in life (Fedina et al., 2019; Greenfield & Marks, 2010; Hardy et al., 2013; Jiménez et al., 2019; Jirapramukpitak et al., 2011). On the other hand, victims also described experiencing a number of traumatic life

events prior to trafficking, increasing their vulnerability to later mental illness. These included sexual abuse from family members or family friends, as well as becoming homeless or running away as a result of childhood neglect. This points to the idea that factors like previous trauma may increase vulnerability to later mental health problems, an idea which has been supported in previous literature (Agorastos et al., 2014; Bailey et al., 2018; Carr et al., 2013; Copeland et al., 2018). More specifically, previous trauma can have additive effects, not only increasing the risk of PTSD in adulthood, but also complicating the presentation of PTSD—a condition which some professionals now deem ‘complex PTSD’ (Agorastos et al., 2014; Breslau et al., 2014; Cloitre et al., 2009; Ogle et al., 2013; van der Kolk et al., 2005; Yehuda & LeDoux, 2007). While this emerging distinction between types of vulnerabilities is not clear-cut or exclusive, it is clear that various vulnerability factors play a role in individuals’ susceptibility to trafficking as well as its later effects.

This study is novel in that it proposes specific psychological mechanisms that may mediate the relationship between vulnerability, trafficking, and/or later effects of trafficking on mental health. For example, a need for validation and support seemed to explain the relationship between having a dysfunctional family and becoming trafficked. Family conflict or childhood neglect may have left individuals with a need for validation, which in turn encouraged them to seek it out in risky situations, eventually leading to trafficking. Similarly, previous sexual abuse and previous mental health problems did not directly lead an individual to being trafficked, but did result in self-image issues that placed that individual in riskier situations. A sense of guilt, shame, and hopelessness internalized early on in life through vulnerability factors may have a multiplicative effect on mental health post-trafficking, for instance, by exacerbating negative self-concepts in depressed individuals. Being aware of possible mediators helps researchers and

clinicians understand how and why victims may end up trafficked in the first place, as well as how and why effects are as severe as they are. Where there are individuals whose need for love and validation are thwarted and unfulfilled by dysfunctional families, there is a greater craving for validation, resulting in greater vulnerability. More harrowingly, we now have greater insight into the expertise with which traffickers exploit vulnerable individuals. There is therefore an urgent need to identify those who are vulnerable as well as those who prey on the vulnerable.

### ***A Critical Interplay Between Manipulation, Control, and Internalization***

The psychological mechanisms behind trafficking appeared to play a critical role in the development of mental health issues post-trafficking. While force, fraud, and coercion are the three main tenants of human trafficking, the two main psychological mechanisms that emerged from the present study were deception, which bears similarities to fraud, and manipulation, which includes coercion (Buss, 1987). Buss (1987) previously established six major tactics of manipulation: a) charm, b) silent treatment, c) coercion, d) reason, e) regression, and f) debasement. Based on victims' descriptions in the present study, it appears that charm and coercion were the primary control tactics used by traffickers, where charm involved being loving and romantic and coercion involved threats, drugs, or abuse to pressure an individual. These findings provide support for previous literature suggesting that charm, usually through promised affection, is often a prerequisite for coercion into trafficking (Gotch, 2016; Jiménez et al., 2019; Serie et al., 2018). This points further to the use of romantic relationships as a means of manipulation and exploitation (Lyndon et al., 2007; Shandro et al., 2016; Spidel et al., 2006), as the majority of victims in the present study also described having a romantic relationship with her trafficker. Furthermore, this study supports existing research on psychological coercion

methods, including forced drug use, beatings, confiscation of identification, and degradation (Baldwin et al., 2015; Ioannou & Oostinga, 2015; Shandro et al., 2016; Spidel et al., 2006).

As a result of the control tactics used by their traffickers, victims talked of experiencing psychological consequences, such as trust issues, low self-esteem, and intense psychological distress. This brings to light a possible distinction between psychological consequences brought on purely by psychological abuse, versus those brought on by physical or sexual abuse. The present findings are consistent with previous research suggesting that psychological abuse is an important predictor of PTSD and depression (Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Mechanic et al., 2008; Zelikovsky & Lynn, 2002), perhaps even more than physical abuse (Baldry, 2003; Dias et al., 2015; Greenfield & Marks, 2010; Street & Arias, 2001). Many victims reported experiencing mental illness in the forms of PTSD and depression, which may equally have been a result of the physical abuse they had undergone. This is in line with existing research which suggests that physical and sexual abuse are also reliable predictors of PTSD and depression (Carr et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2010; Cloitre et al., 2009; Copeland et al., 2018; Rimal & Papadopoulos, 2016; Serafini et al., 2015). Based on the narratives alone, it is difficult to distinguish between each type of abuse and its specific psychological effect; however, the narratives seem to suggest that psychological abuse, compared to physical abuse, has equally or even more damaging effects on victims' mental health. These findings reiterate the importance of investigating psychological abuse, but also the critical interaction between psychological, physical, and sexual abuse on mental health outcomes of trafficking victims.

It appeared also that psychological consequences, including feelings of betrayal and loss of self-worth, were made particularly disabling through the process of internalization over time. It is the lying, the heartbreak, threats, beatings, and constant rapes, that create a complex

situation leading to these girls internalizing what such treatment implies—that they are worth nothing or are simply commodities payable to their clients. Moreover, once women have internalized responsibility, once they blame themselves, they are even less likely to seek escape and help, further enhancing their entrapment. Feelings of guilt, shame, low self-esteem, hopelessness, and constant fear are precursors for mental disorders such as depression and PTSD, and may cause fluctuating senses of identity within victims, which then lead to psychological symptoms such as depersonalization and dissociation (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Zelikovsky & Lynn, 2002). It is essential for researchers and clinicians to investigate how the use of a slow, lengthy process of control establishment, through emotional and psychological manipulation specifically, impacts an individual. The deep complexities and effects of control establishment tactics should be brought into the foreground of research in order to inform intervention efforts as well as to assist remaining victims in their escape (Baldwin et al., 2015; Ioannou & Oostinga, 2015; Jiménez et al., 2019; Lyndon et al., 2007).

### ***Beyond Diagnosis***

Perhaps more interesting and more pressing were the factors that individuals cited as barriers to their recovery. Many individuals mentioned both complex social issues, like stigma, or more straightforward logistical issues, like establishing legal residency, as preventing them from even starting the recovery process, supporting previous findings (Domoney et al., 2015; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Shandro et al., 2016). These findings suggest that attention be drawn away from diagnosis and intervention, and be directed first towards logistical interventions that seek to reestablish an individual's place in society. Prior to clinical intervention, it may be more important to first guarantee victims' safety, legality, and residency. Results from this study are consistent with prior research stating that true restoration must

involve not just clinical treatment but also job apprenticeships, financial counselors, and mentors, and that clinicians need to take into account the accessibility and affordability of such resources (Gonzalez et al., 2019; Ladd & Weaver, 2018). Findings also support previous research on trauma-informed practices, which place a great emphasis on guaranteeing a safe environment for survivors to heal through collaboration, partnership, and reciprocity (Hardy et al., 2013; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Ladd & Weaver, 2018; Levine, 2017; Robjant et al., 2017). Still, there is an increasing need for interventions to be developed specifically for sex trafficking survivors because the surrounding social stigma and shame may necessitate more intensive reintegration (Contreras et al., 2017; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016). Overall, a holistic treatment perspective should be taken by identifying non-clinical contributing factors to a victim's situation and mental health condition, rather than simply relying on standard treatment protocols as per diagnosis.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

A strength of this paper is the use of first-person narratives, which provide a rich and personal understanding of the phenomena. This paper also focuses in on narratives of trafficking in Western countries, which have been underrepresented in the previous literature. Furthermore, this paper takes a unique approach in using the Internet as a sampling pool for sex trafficking narratives, which ethically and practically, are difficult to access (Levine, 2017). Using the Internet to gather accessible online sources gives voice to a group who are often hard to identify and reach, and considering the Internet's accessibility, can attract a wide range of contributors and audiences given the worldwide nature of human trafficking.

There are, however, a number of important limitations regarding online narratives that must also be considered. First, it is impossible to verify the credibility of the original source, who

the victims are, or the veracity of their reported experiences. For this reason, there is also little opportunity to clarify aspects of victims' experiences, as opposed to other methods like interviews. Secondly, online narratives provide limited information regarding the demographics of the sample. Given that experiences of trafficking may vary by location, gender, age, and ethnicity, understanding the context of a victim's demographics could have resulted in a more in-depth interpretation of the themes. It is important to note, however, that missing data may be inherent in this field of literature, since many victims may not actually know their own demographics, and even so, may not be willing to disclose them (Levine, 2017). Thirdly, the use of the Internet requires us to make some assumptions about socioeconomic status and literacy skills. Only those who can afford Internet access and possess sufficient literacy skills are capable of posting online narratives, which means the sample may have excluded key narratives from other women with limited access and literacy. Similarly, limiting the sampling pool to only Internet sources may have excluded other possibly useful accounts from books, research literature, and videos.

In addition, we must consider limitations regarding the sources of the narratives. First, many of the first-person accounts were retrieved from NPO and media websites, making them subject to potential bias in their intended motives and audiences. For example, it is impossible to know whether organizations had probed individuals for particular topics or guided them to certain conclusions in the writing of their accounts. Media accounts are also often written with the aim of public appeal, leading to the possibility of exaggeration, exclusion of key details, or use of emotional language to appeal to audiences. Similarly, search engines like Google tend to favor news sites and websites of established organizations, which may overlook other narratives posted on lesser known blogs or social media. Although using accounts from lower down search

results could be a useful subject for further research, using the most popular returned searches in this study led to accounts mostly from established organizations, which may indicate greater credibility and authenticity. Also, given the difficulty in accessing narratives in this field, the ability to access any narratives at all on the Internet can be considered an asset and an important starting point for this topic of research. Overall, while the reliability of online narratives cannot be fully accounted for, there is evidence of the saturation of themes across the accounts which lends validity to the data.

Another limitation of this study is a potential lack of transferability, as 22 of 30 accounts were from the United States. It may therefore be difficult to transfer results to Western countries as a whole, and the study may more accurately be designated as North-American. Similarly, all the accounts retrieved were from female victims and results cannot be transferred to experiences of male, non-binary, or transgender individuals. Lastly, differences between international and domestic trafficking could not be clearly accounted for in this study. The dynamics of international and domestic trafficking are undoubtedly very different, and although this differentiation was not the focus of the current paper, it would make a valuable point for further research.

### **Future Research**

In order to expand on this research, future thematic analyses should seek to utilize a larger, broader, and more distributed sample of narratives from Western countries in order to produce more potentially transferable results. Moreover, regional differences in sex trafficking should continue to be explored. For example, a similar analysis could also be performed on non-Western countries, as well as a comparative analysis between both Western and non-Western countries. It may also be helpful to conduct a similar analysis within individual countries, to

identify country-specific characteristics of sex trafficking. Furthermore, there is very little research to date on deception and its role in trafficking. Given that deception arose in the present study as a major tactic of trafficking, it would make a valuable topic for further research.

Of course, it would also be beneficial to move away from looking at narratives only and interview trafficking survivors directly. Although this would come with a variety of ethical and practical challenges, interviews would be the next valuable step in gathering direct insight into survivors' experiences. Additional research should also investigate the potential mediators between trafficking and mental health consequences. Clinicians should think about the psychological problems, including guilt, shame, and stigma, that need to be tackled in order to make interventions more successful. A turn towards quantitative analyses of such mediators may also help to identify particular risk factors associated with certain mental health outcomes. Lastly, because many victims experience previous trauma prior to being trafficked, it would be worth investigating how previous trauma and multiple trauma play out in the development of PTSD, and perhaps 'complex PTSD,' in sex trafficking victims. This could be vital in the continuing development of trauma-informed practices.

### **Clinical Implications**

Current findings suggest three main clinical implications to be considered. First, this study effectively outlines the types of vulnerabilities that make an individual susceptible to post-trafficking mental health problems. Various factors were identified as leaving individuals vulnerable to victimization, and therefore may be starting points for the development of effective prevention techniques. Dysfunctional households, for instance, may be a critical starting point, as many of the other vulnerabilities identified—destructive relationships, mental health issues, and sexual abuse—often stem from the family of origin, and being aware of this family background

can help predict and prevent later vulnerabilities. For example, knowing about child neglect in the household would allow others to intervene with the necessary support, which may prevent children from running away, living on the streets, or seeking validation in destructive relationships. Practically, school faculties, clinicians, and even the public, should be trained on how to recognize signs of a dysfunctional household, as well as the warning signs of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse (Domoney et al., 2015; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016. Levine et al., 2017; Shandro et al., 2016). Where parents may not be providing adequate support for their children, it is even more imperative that other responsible adults remain vigilant and intervene earlier. This is further upheld by the fact that individuals who are suffering abuse or family conflict may not speak up themselves (Baldry et al., 2003; Shandro et al., 2016).

Second, clinicians must be aware of how long-term deception and manipulation may affect an individual, in terms of its severity and its effects. Future post-trafficking mental health interventions should therefore aim at pinpointing and reworking the effects of psychological abuse (Baldry, 2003; Dias et al., 2015), such as a deep internalization of guilt or negative self-identity. In terms of clinical strategies, it would be beneficial for therapists to work with individuals' specific beliefs regarding core issues like shame, guilt, and self-worth (Contreras et al., 2017; Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al., 2016; Shandro et al., 2016). An important goal would be to help individuals rebuild their sense of self-identity and self-worth, as well as to build healthier templates for future relationships. Meanwhile, therapists should also assess and help prevent the risk of negative behaviors that would lead to vulnerable situations, such as involvement in future destructive relationships.

Lastly and most importantly, this study identifies practical barriers and facilitators for recovery after trafficking and strongly suggests that a holistic treatment approach be taken. Many

times, what prevented an individual from making a start on recovery was simply lacking resources or having a criminal record. For this reason, solving logistical issues may be the most critical first step in any future post-trafficking mental health intervention (Domoney et al., 2015). The results therefore suggest that effective treatment of victims of sex trafficking would best be met by multi-disciplinary care, where social needs are addressed alongside mental health needs.

**Declaration of Interest**

None

**Figures and Tables**

Figure 1

*Search strategy flowchart.* This flowchart depicts the search strategy and sample selection process, beginning with a total of 300 identified accounts. After removing duplicates and assessing for eligibility, a total of 30 accounts were included in analysis.

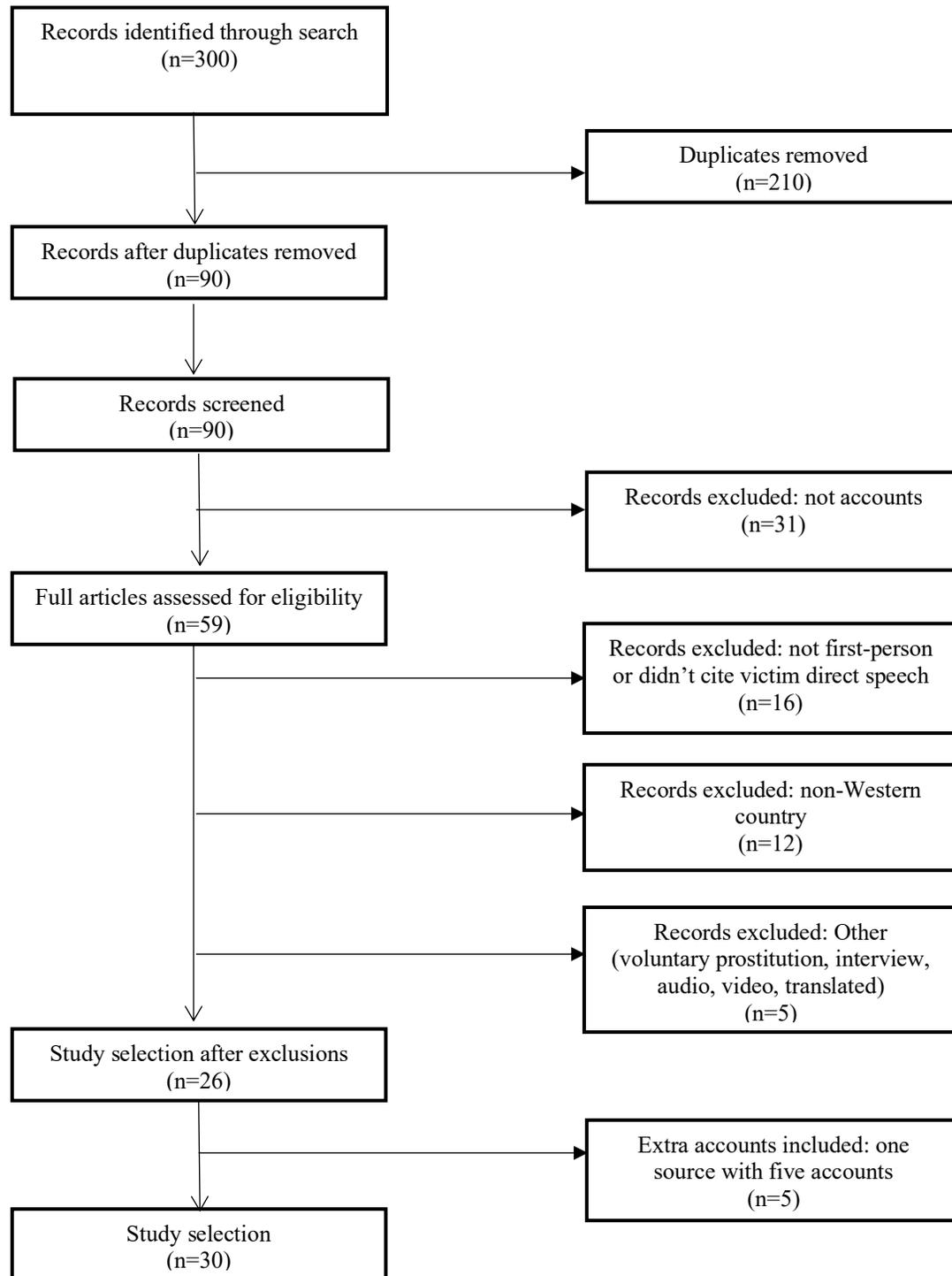


Table 1

*Sample demographics*

<b>Source ID</b>	<b>Perspective in which source is written</b>	<b>Source type</b>	<b>Country of trafficking</b>	<b>Country/Region of origin</b>
<b>A1</b>	First	Non-profit organization (NPO)	Australia	Southeast Asia
<b>A2</b>	First	NPO	Canada	Canada
<b>A3</b>	First	NPO	Germany	Bavaria
<b>A4</b>	First/Third	Media	Canada	Canada
<b>A5</b>	First	NPO	United Kingdom	United Kingdom
<b>A6</b>	First	Official government website	USA	USA
<b>A7</b>	First	Anti-trafficking coalition website	USA (Nevada)	USA
<b>A8</b>	First	NPO	USA	USA
<b>A9</b>	First	NPO	USA (New Jersey)	USA
<b>A10</b>	First	Official government website	USA	USA
<b>A11</b>	First	Religious discussion website	USA	USA
<b>A12</b>	First	Magazine	USA (New York)	Indonesia
<b>A13</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Arizona)	USA
<b>A14</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Rhode Island)	USA
<b>A15</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Pennsylvania)	USA
<b>A16</b>	First/Third	Media	Canada	Canada
<b>A17</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Texas)	USA (Texas)
<b>A18</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Florida)	USA
<b>A19</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Maine)	USA
<b>A20</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Indiana)	USA
<b>A21</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (New York)	Kenya
<b>A22</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (South Carolina)	USA
<b>A23</b>	First/Third	Media	USA	USA
<b>A24</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Washington)	USA
<b>A25</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Louisiana)	USA

<b>A26</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Michigan)	USA
<b>A27</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (New York)	Russia
<b>A28</b>	First/Third	Media	Canada	Canada
<b>A29</b>	First/Third	Media	USA (Ohio)	USA
<b>A30</b>	First/Third	Media	United Kingdom (Manchester)	Romania

Table 2

*Overview of themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Sub-themes</b>
<b>Category 1: Before trafficking</b>		
Theme 1: Vulnerabilities	Mention of experiences that individuals perceived as making them more susceptible to being trafficked, and/or suffering later mental health problems post-trafficking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dysfunctional family (child abuse/neglect)</li> <li>• Destructive relationships</li> <li>• Existing mental health problems</li> <li>• Previous sexual abuse</li> <li>• Being an immigrant</li> </ul>
Theme 2: Barriers to Escape	Factors that victims described as encouragement to enter/remain in the sex industry* or factors preventing them from escaping (whilst they still had the chance to leave).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Financial incentive (money)</li> </ul>
<b>Category 2: During trafficking</b>		
Theme 3: Deception and manipulation	Comments about traffickers' lies as a way of manipulation, which victims spoke of as a way to reel them in.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• False promises of:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Love/relationship</li> <li>○ New job</li> <li>○ Luxurious good</li> <li>○ Survival needs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Manipulation of trust</li> </ul>

Theme 4: Establishment of control	Means by which traffickers established and reinforced their control over victims.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Physical/sexual abuse</li> <li>• Drugs</li> <li>• Threats</li> <li>• Theft</li> </ul>
Theme 5: Internalization	Mention of desensitization and normalization of abuse resulting in altered self-perception.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desensitization/normalization</li> <li>• Negatively altered self-perceptions                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Worthlessness</li> <li>○ Low self-esteem</li> <li>○ Negative self-identity</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
<b>Category 3: After trafficking</b>		
Theme 6: Mental health consequences	Experiences of clinical mental health symptoms/disorders which victims struggled with post-trafficking.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Depression</li> <li>• PTSD</li> <li>• Atypical symptoms                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Guilt</li> <li>○ Amnesia</li> <li>○ Anxiety</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Theme 7: Barriers to societal re-entry	Issues which victims described as preventing them from full recovery and societal reintegration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stigma</li> <li>• Logistical issues</li> </ul>
Theme 8: Facilitators of recovery	Resources which victims described as being beneficial to their recovery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Counselling</li> <li>• Support</li> <li>• Security (financial and physical)</li> </ul>
Theme 9: Positive outcomes	Descriptions of positive outlooks and outcomes during and/or after recovery.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reminder of strength</li> <li>• Resilience</li> <li>• Improved self-worth</li> </ul>

\*applies to victims whose early experiences in the sex industry setting later spiraled into trafficking

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