

IDENTIFYING SEXUAL TRAFFICKING ONLINE

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SUMMARY

Adult Services Websites (ASWs) are online platforms widely used by independent sex workers to advertise their services and connect with clients online. There is growing evidence however, that human traffickers are increasingly using ASWs to post profiles advertising trafficked women, camouflaging their victims amongst independent sex workers online. This study sought to create a tool with which policing actors could distinguish between ASW profiles posted by independent sex workers and profiles created by traffickers. Distinguishing between these will potentially allow law enforcement agencies to prioritise their investigatory efforts more efficiently.

KEY FINDINGS

- A diverse range of actors see value in using ASW profiles as an entry point for law enforcement investigation of potential trafficking. This suggests that governmental proposals to shut down ASWs may be misguided and could prove counterproductive.
- Existing law enforcement approaches to tackling human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation via investigation of ASWs vary widely from one agency to the other. While some agencies make use of sophisticated data scraping and analytical tools, others are using basic, manual techniques of analysis.
- The creation of the Sexual Trafficking Identification Matrix (STIM) arising from this study offers an analytical tool which can be used alongside other risk assessment measures to identify ASW profiles which are more likely to have been posted by traffickers, than those created by independent sex workers.
- The STIM was found to be proficient in identifying high-risk ASW profiles which contain potential indicators of trafficking activity. This proved to be a useful starting point for prioritisation of investigatory resources by police practitioners.
- Notwithstanding the above finding, the STIM was not flawless and its limitations included the identification of false positives which occurred during the research.
- With the above in mind, the STIM is not designed to be used as a stand-alone tool and instead should be used as part of a broader suite of risk assessment measures. In particular, police officers' professional expertise and experience are key in mitigating the limitations of the STIM and maximising its potential.

THE RESEARCH

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PROJECT BACKGROUND

Advancements in information and communication technology in the past two decades have presented organised crime actors with new opportunities for the exploitation of victims and illegal profiteering. This is evident in the context of human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation and one such example comes in the use of Adult Service Websites (ASWs) by traffickers (see Antonopoulos *et al.*, 2020). ASWs are online platforms on which sex workers post profiles advertising their services, effectively creating a “virtual red-light district” (Cauduro *et al.*, 2009: 59) connecting sex workers and their clients online. It has been argued that ASWs offer sex workers a safer environment within which to operate and a welcome retreat from street-based sex work (Fiveash, 2018). In recent years however, traffickers have made increased use of ASWs, using this platform to post profiles advertising their victims, falsely portraying them as consenting sex workers.

Distinguishing between profiles posted by independent sex workers and those posted by traffickers presents a key challenge for law enforcement agencies. This 12-month study worked alongside South Yorkshire Police to create an analytical tool to facilitate the identification of ASW profiles most likely to have been posted by traffickers.

FINDINGS

Interviews

Interviews with practitioners and other experts in this field yielded a broad consensus that examining ASW profiles can offer a crucial entry point for the investigation of human trafficking and sexual exploitation. While ASWs undoubtedly facilitate traffickers’ activities, the use of any online platform by an offender inevitably results in a digital fingerprint which law enforcement agencies can investigate. Moreover, data potentially available from ASWs may also provide a wealth of evidence to aid in the prosecution of traffickers. This consensus amongst participants is salient since the prohibition of ASWs has recently been discussed in parliament and an All-Party Parliamentary Group has proposed that ASWs should be banned on the basis that they facilitate the exploitation of women (APPG 2018). The views of participants in this study and their belief that ASWs are a critical point of investigation, suggests that banning ASWs may be counterproductive and may in fact exacerbate the vulnerability of victims in this context.

Interviews also revealed the vast array of existing practices amongst law enforcement agencies in the UK in their approaches to investigating suspect ASW profiles. Here, a broad spectrum of sophistication and expense in existing approaches is evident. Some police forces currently investigate ASWs using data scraping software such as Traffic Jam or Spotlight. These tools have been developed in the private sector and police forces pay a fee to use them. At the other end of the scale are forces which instruct their officers and analysts to manually review ASW profiles, a time-consuming exercise relying heavily on individuals’ perception of what a high-risk ASW profile may look like. Elsewhere, some forces are developing in-house, bespoke tools and software to analyse ASWs based on the local marketplace for sex work in the force area. What emerges here is a complex patchwork of different investigatory approaches and the extent to which different forces communicate good practice or share resources is unclear.

The Sexual Trafficking Identification Matrix

Interview participants were asked, based on their expert knowledge and professional experience, to suggest the types of indicators one may expect to find on an ASW profile posted by a trafficker, as opposed to one posted by an independent sex worker. Many of their suggestions echoed the indicators identified in previous research, most of which has been conducted in the USA (for a full discussion of these indicators, see Ibanez and Suthers, 2014; Ibanez and Gazan, 2016; see also Diba et al., 2017 and Antonopoulos et al., 2020 for the UK).

Potential indicators were synthesized into the Sexual Trafficking Identification Matrix (STIM), a tool designed to enable users to analyse any given ASW profile and determine how many of the indicators are evident in the profile. Having applied the STIM to a series of ASW profiles, officers and analysts at South Yorkshire Police offered a number of key reflections.

First, the STIM proved to be a user-friendly tool which enabled a relatively rapid sifting of low, medium and high risk ASW profiles. This allowed officers and analysts to prioritise their resources more effectively towards higher risk profiles and ensured some degree of consistency and rigour in their initial examination of ASW profiles.

Second, a key benefit of the STIM is its ability to align to the local marketplace for sex work and human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation. Different geographical areas tend to show variances in some aspects of the local sex work marketplace, including differences around pricing of sexual services, the use of massage parlours or the ethnic backgrounds of trafficked women. The STIM can be rapidly altered by users to mould around these local variances, meaning that it could potentially be adapted by other forces in different areas.

Third, the danger of false positives remains. In one instance, the STIM identified an ASW profile as highly indicative of trafficking but further investigation revealed the profile to be used by an independent sex worker. The indicators flagged by the STIM in this instance were false positives. This is a useful reminder of the limitations of analytical tools such as the STIM and reinforce the importance of using such tools within a broader suite of other risk assessment measures.

Fourth, while analytical tools such as the STIM can complement investigatory efforts, police officers' experience and knowledge remain a key component of these investigations. Knowledge of the local marketplace, intelligence on known offenders and existing contacts with sex workers were all deployed alongside the use of the STIM by officers and analysts during the study. This key occupational expertise and experience was critical in mitigating the limitations of the STIM and maximising its potential benefits.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed the positive contribution an analytical tool such as the STIM can make to existing practices in tackling trafficking and sexual exploitation. As traffickers make greater use of platforms such as ASWs to exploit their victims, so too can law enforcement agencies use the same platforms to track and apprehend offenders. Alongside police officer expertise and experience, tools such as the STIM can help to more effectively identify high-risk ASWs profiles, ensuring that police resources are more effectively targeted and deployed.

METHODOLOGY

The project comprised of four key phases. Firstly, a literature review of existing work concerning the use of ASWs by human traffickers was conducted. This review collated the findings of previous research on the indicators of suspect ASW profiles. Secondly, 27 interviews were conducted with a range of experts in human trafficking, sexual exploitation and the use of ASWs. Interviewees included law enforcement officers and analysts, legal representatives, NGO representatives and academic researchers. The interviews acted as a consensus building exercise, contributing to the creation of the STIM alongside the findings of the literature review. Thirdly, the STIM was used by South Yorkshire Police officers and analysts as part of a live operation to analyse ASW profiles and identify profiles highly indicative of trafficking activity. Finally, South Yorkshire Police officers took part in a focus group to provide feedback to the project team on the STIM, its operational utility as well as its limitations in practice. Based on this feedback, a second iteration of the STIM was created and delivered to South Yorkshire Police.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

The Sexual Trafficking Identification Matrix was used by only one police force in the study. The value of this tool could be better understood and developed if it were used by other forces in future. This could potentially allow the specific indicators of the STIM to be altered to align to local marketplaces for sex work in any given force area. Doing so would create a bespoke tool of analysis and investigation for each police force.

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