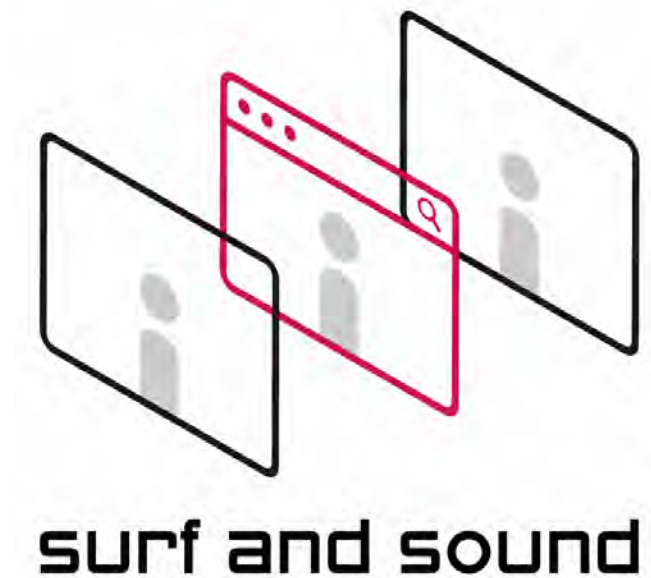


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Improving and sharing knowledge on the Internet's
role in the human smuggling and trafficking process

ISEC 2013 Action Grants (HOME\2013\ISEC\AG\THB)



UK Report
2017

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Executive Summary

This report addresses this gap by investigating the role of the Internet and digital technologies in the processes of human smuggling and trafficking in the United Kingdom (UK). The research presented here consists in an extensive examination of how the Internet and digital technologies facilitates

- i. the (a) recruitment and (b) transportation/entry phases of people smuggling towards and/or into the UK, and;
- ii. the (a) recruitment (b) transportation and (c) exploitation phases of the trafficking process in the UK sex and labour markets.

Our research relies primarily on a UK-based virtual ethnography to acquire primary data, conducted between November 2015 and February 2017. As a research method, virtual ethnography extends the ethnographic field and situated observation from the examination of face-to-face researcher-informant interactions. Furthermore, the research has involved an “off-line” component, namely, 16 semi-structured interviews that took place with a variety of key actors in the UK, including non-governmental organisation representatives (NGOs), law enforcement agents (LEAs), smugglers, and experts on cyber-crime and/or human trafficking and smuggling.

As regards **human smuggling**, our findings suggest that social networking sites are a key instrument in the recruitment phase. They are used by both migrants and smugglers to broadcast information about travelling routes, the occurrence of border closures, transportation services and involved costs of arranging trips. The use and popularity of such sites is varied, with some of those pages receiving particular attention due to the fact that they expose fraudulent smugglers advertising deceptive transportation services.

A significant amount of Facebook pages were actively advertising *transportation* services, including boat, yacht or flight trips and to a lesser extent, land routes where the journey would be made on foot, to various countries in Europe. One popular route involves Turkey, particularly the coastal cities of Izmir and Mersin, from which are directed to various islands in Greece, and then further on through various European routes towards their destination in the UK.

In numerous instances there is interplay *between* various forms of technology, namely between the Internet and mobile phone applications, such as WhatsApp and Viber. Smugglers use Facebook as a gateway advertising their services to potential migrants. Further communications, most likely to arrange transportation journeys and discuss payment then take place through those other platforms, including text messages and mobile telephony. Such means may also be used by other smugglers, whether individuals or networks, to take over in the process of moving the migrants on, should it be disrupted for any reason.

Overall, the use of the Internet, in particular social media and mobile phones are key mechanisms in the logistics of the transportation process, specifically allowing smugglers to maintain contact with the clients during the transportation, upon arrival to the destination and, at the stage of the arrangement of the payment.

With regard to **human trafficking**, there is a wide range of websites that are instrumental to the *recruitment* phase, including social networking and microblogging services such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as online classifieds, dating and international marriage agency sites. Congruently with known “offline” practices, traffickers often post deceiving advertisements for jobs such as administration, cleaning, child care, or other forms of work. Direct contact is also initiated with victims in chat rooms or via social networking sites, where traffickers pose as friends or lovers to recruit victims, often exchanging e-mails, messages, photographs and videos with their victims to build a relationship and gain their trust and confidence.

The UK is primarily a *destination* country for trafficking victims from: Central and Southeastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); Africa; Asia; Latin America; and the Caribbean. The *transportation* to the UK is frequently executed legally, as the victims move voluntarily and co-operate with the traffickers believing that they are taking a legitimate job. Our virtual ethnography on the deep web also revealed as use of the internet as source of forged documents aimed to facilitate the transportation of trafficking victims to the UK.

The conduct of transportation occurs in a variety of forms, ranging from the involvement of criminal groups and networks to the activity of lone entrepreneurs—who may, for example, purchase documentation on behalf of their recruited victims. Digital technologies enable counterfeiting as better fakes be developed at reduced prices. Additionally, they link dispersed locations in global trade relations, making the formation of networks of buyers and sellers and the exchange of money relatively straightforward.

The most common type of human trafficking for both adult and child (minor) victims in the UK was trafficking for the purposes of *labour exploitation*. Labour traffickers operate across the UK and exploit workers in low-skilled areas of work. In these cases digital technologies complement informal ‘offline’ forms of recruitment, such as word-of-mouth, or through friends and relatives. With regard to trafficking for *sexual exploitation*, however, inferences about the UK situation are more difficult since sex work has moved from a predominantly physical environment to an increasingly virtual landscape to such an extent that most prostitution is currently advertised and solicited online.

Our findings suggest that the use of the internet and digital technologies can offer indications about the occurrence of trafficking. Such indications may include a) one listed mobile phone number associated with more women selling sexual services b) the use of multiple profiles on various online classifieds and sex sites by the same woman under numerous aliases, ages and, possibly, locations in the UK c) the disparity in prices between non-native and native women, and d) the poor use of the language of the country in the profile text on online classifieds.

The first two cases would suggest a “shared management” situation, in which women may be under the control of a trafficking gang or network or a pimp, who control their profiles, are in charge of the mobile phone, and of the subsequent bookings made. Additionally, the transportation of women between cities and countries may be an indication of trafficking as traffickers may circulate women between locations to cater to the demand of clients for women to purchase sex from.

Overall, as regards both human smuggling and trafficking, our findings suggest that the internet and digital technologies do not merely complement existing offline practices, but rather significantly expand the potential for illicit enterprise. In the UK context, online activity may entail that the prevalence of such illicit enterprise may be significantly underestimated and, therefore, further research is clearly warranted.

Introduction

Human smuggling and trafficking have become agenda-topping issues in the past twenty years, since global geopolitical changes have exacerbated conditions conducive to clandestine population flows and the development of transnational illegal enterprises associated with those flows. The increased awareness of the issue and the recognition that it presents a major area of focus for the effort to address and suppress transnational organised crime has resulted in the formation of a new global prohibition regime (Andreas and Nadelmann, 2006; Papanicolaou, 2011), by means of the introduction of two major international instruments (supplementing the 2000 United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime), namely the *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children*, and the *Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air*. According to the Protocol against human smuggling: “Smuggling of migrants shall mean the procurement, in order to obtain, directly or indirectly, a financial or other material benefit, of the illegal entry of a person into a State Party of which the person is not a national or a permanent resident”.

According to the Trafficking Protocol, trafficking in persons is “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation” (United Nations, 2000). Exploitation in the sex and labour markets constitutes the core criminal activity in human trafficking cases. Other categories of exploitation, according to British authorities, include domestic servitude, organ harvesting, forced begging, forced marriage and illegal adoption. Human smuggling is often confused with human trafficking because of their common platform that is irregular migration; however, smuggling does not involve exploitation, and it is an offence against the legal framework of migration of transit and destination countries, and an offence against the public order, whereas trafficking is a crime against the person.

Although human smuggling and trafficking are not new phenomena (see Morrison, 2002), over the past decades or so, they have experienced an unprecedented boom due to the development, advancement and proliferation of digital technologies (Hughes, 2014; Latonero et al., 2011, 2012; Sarkar, 2015). According to a recent Europol report regarding the trafficking in human beings (THB) in the European Union (EU), online interactions and encounters have been observed as facilitating “several aspects of human trafficking and exploitation: targeting of potential victims; access to personal data; arrangement of logistics and transportation; recruitment through social media, chat forums and other websites; advertisement of victims; their exploitation and surveillance” (Europol, 2016a: 12 EUROPOL, 2016b). The burgeoning dissemination of digital technologies¹, in particular the Internet, has afforded new, creative opportunities for individual criminals and collectivities of criminals. As such, these groups have been empowered to operate with greater efficiency and anonymity, given that they are able to instantly communicate with potentially large audiences over extensive distances and across geographic boundaries (see Hughes, 2014; Latonero et al, 2011; Mendel and Sharapov, 2014; Sykiotou, 2007). The expeditious dissemination and usage of the Internet and other digital technologies such as smart phones have added a new dimension to the trafficking and smuggling of human beings, creating new ways and means of facilitation, as well as affecting various aspects of trafficking, including the recruitment, control and exploitation of victims (Sarkar, 2015).

¹ Included also are Applications, or ‘Apps’ as they are popularly referred to, which are programmes that run on smart phones and other mobile devices such as tablets. Most popular are instant messaging and Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP) communication apps such as WhatsApp, Viber and Skype.

At present, there is relatively limited scholarly work investigating the role that digital technologies play in the processes of human smuggling and trafficking or the particular ways in which the Internet has been used to shape the criminal strategies of traffickers and smugglers (see, for example, Di Nicola, Cauduro and Falletta, 2015; Latonero et al, 2011, 2012). Researchers across several academic disciplines including Computer Science, Information Science, Sociology, Criminology and Law (Bach and Dohy, 2015) have begun to address this paucity of empirical research and knowledge, utilising various methodologies and theoretical frameworks to do so. A recent and compelling study undertaken by Di Nicola et al. (2015) regarding the use of the Internet and social networking sites to explore possible occurrences of human trafficking and sexual exploitation in Italy, has provided some interesting insights. Di Nicola et al. (2015) conducted an analysis of a sample of prostitution advertisements placed on the most popular adult sites in Italy, as well as of those placed on Twitter pages for five of the most important adult portals. Within these advertisements, the authors discovered a set of indicators that could suggest the presence of human trafficking, and by extension, victims, which were: 1) the nationality of the prostitutes, 2) the listing of a young age, 3) professional images featured of the women in the advertisements, and 4) surface misspellings in the text of the advertisement (Di Nicola et al, 2015). If an advertisement possessed these four indicators, it could strongly suggest that the featured woman in the advertisement was a victim of trafficking (Di Nicola et al, 2015). Moreover, out of 502 advertisements that were listed on the popular Italian adult websites, it was found that 61.4% of the women featured were non-Italian, and described as being from areas such Eastern Europe, the Far East and South America, with 23.9% of these women demonstrating the four aforementioned indicators in their advertisements (Di Nicola et al, 2015). Additionally, 77.2% of the advertisements featuring these non-native women contained several errors in reference to spelling, grammar and punctuation. Di Nicola et al (2015) note that this is a striking finding as it indicates that these women have poor knowledge of the Italian language and are recent arrivals to Italy, or it could suggest that these advertisements have been created and written by written by an exploiter or trafficker who may also possess a limited grasp of Italian vocabulary. Di Nicola et al's (2015) research provides a useful starting point for the study of online sex trafficking, although, as Latonero et al (2011) emphasise, identifying incidences of human trafficking on the Internet is not a straightforward task, and remains a challenge for researchers and law enforcement alike. On this point, Latonero et al (2011) cite a significant report written for the Council of Europe (Sykiotou, 2007), in which researchers undertook an Internet search for potential trafficking sites, to which they emphasised that a website can only be delineated as "suspect" (p. 32) since there is no evidence that the women featured in such advertisements for sexual services are in fact trafficking victims.

In light of such important considerations and issues, the aim of this report is to present a comprehensive empirical account on the role of the Internet and digital technologies in the processes of human smuggling and trafficking in the United Kingdom (UK). In particular, we undertook an extensive examination into the function of the Internet and digital technologies in the facilitation of the (a) recruitment (b) transportation and (c) the exploitation phases of the trafficking process in the both the UK sex and labour markets. Furthermore, in regards to human smuggling, we also strove to investigate how the Internet and digital technologies were able to aid the (a) recruitment and (b) transportation/entry phases of people smuggling towards and/or into the UK. Following the introduction, we move on to outline the methods used in the project, and the data collection process in the second section of the report. The third part of the report is devoted to the presentation and analysis of our findings.

Methodology

As part of our exploratory analysis, a number of methods were used to collect data on the role of the Internet and digital technologies in the processes of human smuggling and trafficking in the UK. Principally, we conducted a UK-based virtual ethnography to acquire primary data between November 2015 and February 2017. As a research method, virtual ethnography extends the ethnographic field and situated observation from the examination of face-to-face researcher-informant interactions (Lenihan and Kelly-Holmes, 2016) and “*transfers the ethnographic tradition of the researcher as an embodied research instrument to the social spaces of the internet*” (Hine, 2008: 257). In this regard, the virtual ethnographer immerses themselves in a virtual environment, observing and interacting using media relevant to that site for an extended period of time (Turney, 2008).

As a starting point to initiate the virtual ethnography, online searches were conducted on Google to ascertain the most popular websites and online classifieds advertising sexual services in the UK, which were: ‘AdultWork.com’, ‘Backpage.com/uk’, ‘Hallo.co.uk’ and ‘Vivastreet.co.uk’, although others were identified during the course of our research relating to human trafficking. In addition, we also utilised social networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as web-forums in our investigations. E-mail accounts and profiles were also created, as a means of being able to enter and study relevant forums and social networking sites. Furthermore, we captured and attained screenshots of images and text from websites, online classifieds, forums and social networking sites. In many instances, multiple screenshots were taken as a useful way of comparing and contrasting changes in web content we had highlighted as being very relevant to our research, a point to which we will return to and discuss, later in the report. With regards to researching the processes of human smuggling online, we assumed a more active role for this specific aspect of the virtual ethnography. In this regard, we created a Facebook account that allowed us to observe pages, groups and people that were advertising smuggling services, such as ways and means of transportation and aiding one’s entry into another country, as well as attempting to engage in conversation with popular smuggling pages, an aspect that we will also come back to and review in greater detail later in the report. Moreover, we also used several keywords, such as “trips”, “smuggling to Europe”, “smuggling services”, “migrate to Europe”, “boat trips”, “yacht excursions”, “travel to Europe” “travelling to the UK”, “visa services” “Schengen visa” and “tours”, which we translated into Arabic and performed searches, both on google and using the search function on social networking sites such as Facebook to discover relevant pages, groups and people. Moreover, we also conducted part of the virtual ethnography on the ‘Deep Web’. In addition, we also examined the role of the Internet and digital technologies in facilitating human trafficking for labour recruitment and exploitation of victims, by investigating popular online classified and recruitment websites that were advertising jobs and employment in the UK labour markets. Additionally, we also inspected native online classified websites in countries where significant trafficking activity to the UK² for the intention of labour exploitation has occurred, as a viable means of trying to detect any suspect advertisements recruiting for jobs in the UK that had been listed on these sites. We used keywords for advertised jobs in these sectors that possess a high risk of exploitation, such as: “agriculture”, “construction”, “au-pair” “nail technician”, “escort”, “masseur” “charity collection”, “waiter/waitress”, “cleaner” and “dancer”, which we translated into various languages, and then performed searches, either via google, or by conducting in-searches, by using the integrated search tool on different job sites.

² In 2014, it was identified by the NCA that the most prevalent countries of origin for potential victims trafficked for purposes of labour and sexual exploitation to the UK were Albania, Lithuania, Slovakia, Poland, Romania and Vietnam. In addition, in cases where the nationality was known, 82% of victims were recruited were European Economic Area (EEA) nationals that were legally entitled to reside and work in the UK (National Crime Agency Strategic Assessment, 2015).

Further compelling sources of useful information came from our analysis of content posted synchronously or asynchronously on web forums. In particular, we examined the free, independent and not-for-profit ‘www.ukpunting.com’ forum, which is the most popular paid sex review and discussion site in the UK, with approximately 104,000 registered members, rendering it as a very large, dynamic and vibrant virtual community, that conforms with the communications scholar Denzin’s (1999) definition of an online community. Here, we took an unobtrusive, non-interactive approach. That is, we did not actively contribute to the forum through posts to any discussions or ‘threads’, which are textual conversations that are arranged chronologically on the forum’s webpages (see Williams and Copes, 2005), where posters, on accessing a chosen thread, are able to read the statements and questions posted by other members of the forum, and add their own articulations to the discussion, by way of interaction, if so inclined. Furthermore, we did not ask any questions by creating new posts, and instead explored existing content. On this forum, male punters³ from various localities in the UK share and extensively discuss, often explicitly, their sexual experiences with female (and intermittently transvestite or transsexual) escorts, through detailed reviews and field reports of their paid encounters, in which experiences can be rated as *positive*, *negative*, or *neutral*, with these ratings clearly marked in bold text in the heading of the review, before the subject title, and coloured in *green*, *red* or *grey*, respectively. Such reviews and reports posted by punters included (often very) detailed information on the physical appearance of the escort, especially in regards to her physique and facial attractiveness, the state of her personal hygiene, her attitude and behaviour throughout the duration of the meeting, whether or not the escort provided all of the sexual services agreed on prior to the appointment, how well the sexual services agreed on were performed, and the duration and cost of the encounter. Some punters would also mention whether the escort was working in a residence with other sex workers, as part of a brothel, and, if the escort was non-native, how good the escort’s knowledge of English was, i.e. at a very basic or conversational or fluent level of spoken communication. The location of the escort’s residence would also be mentioned on occasion, in regards to any possible risks to a punter’s safety or chances of being discovered within the surrounding area. Moreover, prospective punters are able to post questions and make enquiries into the sexual performance of particular escorts, which are usually answered by other punters who have visited that particular escort, who usually share their experiences of the meeting, what sexual activities took place, and their overall satisfaction with the encounter.

We concentrated our research on trying to find topics and discussions of potentially trafficked women, and we were also able to conduct in-searches on the forum to this aim, using search terms such as “bareback”, “brothel”, “gangs”, “pimps”, “profiles”, “trafficked” and “trafficking” and we selected threads⁴ with a high degree of relevance. We also made efforts to see whether certain women we had identified as being possible victims of trafficking were discussed or reviewed on the forum, usually by searching for their aliases. We discovered several salient forum posts and subsequent threads that compellingly illustrated how cognizant some of the punters were of the modus operandi of pimps and traffickers in online contexts, in regards to the set up and presentation of profiles on online classifieds and adult sex websites, that may indicate that the advertised woman, or in some cases, women, could be sexually exploited victims of trafficking. As such, and especially in our discussion of the phase of trafficking pertaining to sexual exploitation, we have incorporated numerous excerpts throughout the report to support our findings. Some researchers have contended that the collection of empirical data online that is trustworthy and representative can be fractious, and have cited issues regarding authenticity, validity, reliability and online research methods (Davey et al, 2012; Hall and

³ In the United Kingdom (UK), the term for one who purchases sex from a prostitute or escort as a client.

⁴ We present all excerpts gleaned from our forum research in exactly the same state as they were posted in the threads we were examining, and accordingly, we have not edited the spelling or grammar. However, we have highlighted any present spelling or grammatical errors, and have made additions to clarify and/or provide a brief explanation to any forum-specific acronyms or terms.

Antonopoulos, 2016). In particular, concerns have been raised by researchers regarding the assessment of the quality of information that has been acquired from web forums, given that they are communicative, unregulated, user-created and active social arenas, as the data collected may be inaccurate, and whether intentional or not, misleading (Davey et al, 2012). However, Hall and Antonopoulos (2016) highlight that data collected from online web forums (as well as social media sites) can produce rich empirical evidence from groups and communities that are normally hard to reach – in this case punters – and can provide substantial insights into the ‘everyday life’ of these individuals and social groups. Hall and Antonopoulos (2016) further point out that whilst some information may be false and delusive, such data obtained online should not lead to a general disregard of its quality, given that the accumulation of data through offline methods does not always produce consistently valid findings. Face-to-face interactions can function to inhibit one’s true feelings, which in some cases, have a greater likelihood of being revealed in an anonymous online realm, as many punters may not be willing to share their experiences with their offline friends, and so the powerful influence of online communities such as forums on the decision-making processes and ideas of punters cannot be ignored or dismissed (see Cauduro et al, 2009). We took such considerations into account, and although we were mindful to recognise that some punters on the forum may have exaggerated or falsified their posts (which may have actually been written by a pimp or a sex worker as an underhanded form of touting), which would reduce the accuracy of the data, we reasoned that, since the forum exists as a valuable source of information that enables punters to make informed decisions about the purchase of sexual services, there is little to gain from providing inaccurate or specious information (see also Blevins and Holt, 2009). In fact, we observed that fellow punters were quick to notice, question and disparage posters that gave, or were suspected to have given deceitful information such as reviews, with sex workers on occasion joining in discussions to dispute or clarify details of an encounter that took place. As a consequence, punters who engaged in such behaviour would have their accounts banned by the owner of the forum, with their reviews being clearly marked as ‘fake review’ and thus, due to such measures being taken to try to diminish the likelihood of false posts, we take content posted by punters on the forum to be generally valid.

In an ‘offline’ context, 16 semi-structured interviews were also undertaken to accumulate data, which took place with a variety of key actors in the UK, including non-governmental organisation representatives (NGOs), law enforcement agents (LEAs), smugglers, and experts on cyber-crime and/or human trafficking and smuggling. The interviews were conducted either face-to-face, by telephone or through Skype, with our participants’ responses being recorded with a digital voice-recorder. By way of ensuring ethical adherence, we created informed consent forms that outlined the nature of the research project, and also the rights of the participants’, as these are put forward by the British Society of Criminology. These forms were presented to the participants prior to the outset of the interview to sign, and once consent was obtained, we immediately commenced with the interviews. We used an interview guide as the basis for our questions, which was conditional to the particular participant we were interviewing. During the interview process however, these interview guides were not followed slavishly.

Results

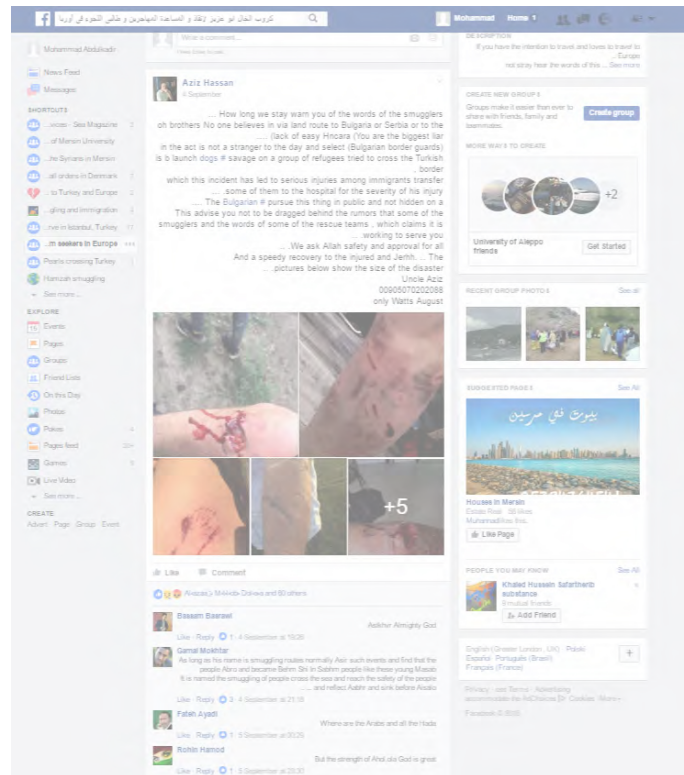
The smuggling phases

Recruitment

The overwhelming majority of our findings relating to the function of the Internet and digital technologies that facilitate the processes of human smuggling to the UK were attained from social

networking websites, in particular Facebook. Our virtual ethnographic research demonstrates that social networking sites are a key instrument for migrants and smugglers to broadcast information about travelling routes, the occurrence of border closures, transportation services and involved costs of arranging trips.

Figure 1. A very popular smuggling page on Facebook broadcasting information of brutal attacks on migrants by border guards and guard dogs on migrants travelling via a land route attempting to cross through the Bulgarian border.



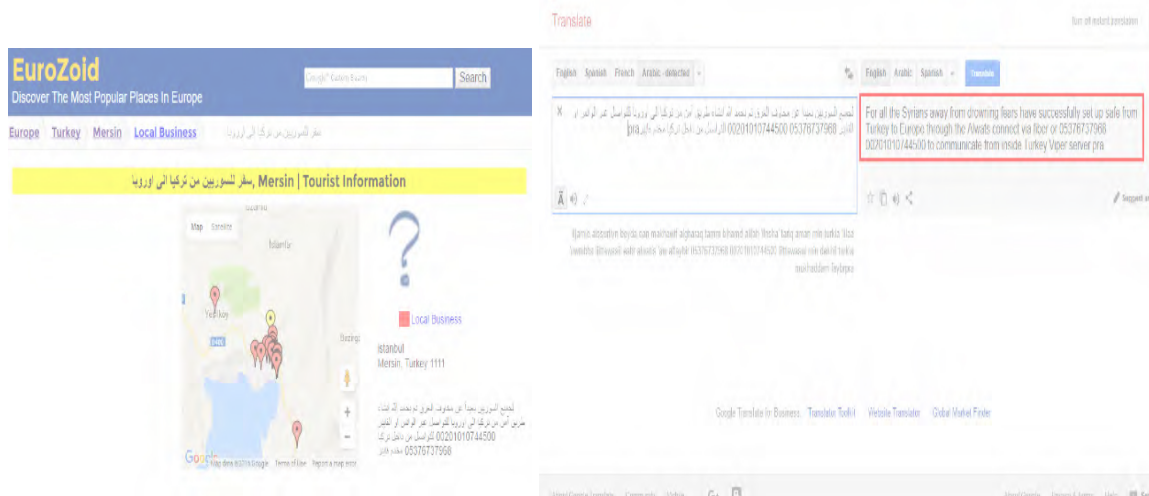
Source: Authors' research

We identified numerous active and highly popular smuggling-related pages and groups on Facebook that advertised transportation services, the sale of counterfeit travel documents such as passports, visas and identification papers including driving licenses, as well as general discussions of the navigation of paths into the UK, as well as in wider Europe. As one of our interviewed experts mentioned, communication and the broadcasting of important information, such as which countries are easy to enter, where borders are open to travel through and where they have been closed, play powerful roles in the recruitment of migrants to be smuggled and influence their decision-making processes:

It [the Internet] would be spreading news, if it's easy to get through the process of an asylum application, the news spreads very quickly, for example 'it's more relaxed in this country or the other country', then people will plan destinations accordingly. Again, it's communication, it's how you spread the news (Interview with Expert 2).

In another typical site we encountered during our research smugglers advertised services by highlighting danger and urging potential clients to connect via Viber app.

Figure 2. The advertisement of a transportation service based in Turkey to travel to Europe, on a popular Europe travel guide website.



Source: Authors' research

Given that most of these pages and groups were private and unable to be freely accessed, we added these pages and groups as 'friends' in order to gain entry and also to receive notifications of new postings and updates relating to transportation journeys, the advertisement of new trips, usually dependent on suitable weather conditions, and the sale of passports or other such counterfeit documents. Owing to the illicit nature of these pages, we noticed that the names would be changed constantly, possibly as a means of avoiding detection, or accounts closed altogether. Indeed, one of our interviewed smugglers remarked that on a frequent basis, human smugglers would continuously create and close pages on Facebook to evade possible law enforcement efforts:

I closed them [Smuggling pages on Facebook] all. There are not there anymore. There is no point in having them. I had many because I used each page for a little bit and then I opened another one and so one. For protection, you know. You don't want to be stable in this business, you need to 'move' again and again for protection (Interview with Smuggler 2).

Our interviews with human smugglers revealed that the Internet was an important tool in their smuggling activities, in particular the recruitment phase to advertise their services, albeit at different levels of use:

Yes [using the Internet] but not as much as you may think. Most of my business in the beginning [recruitment] happens by people [offline]. People know you, they know what you do, they know you are a kacakci [smuggler], and they come to you and tell you what they want. ... I don't trust the internet so much anyway because you never know who might be watching ... My business partner in Kurdistan will send messages to friends, e-mails and ask "do you know anyone who wants to go to Europe? If you do, tell them to send me a message at so and so..." (Interview with Smuggler 1).

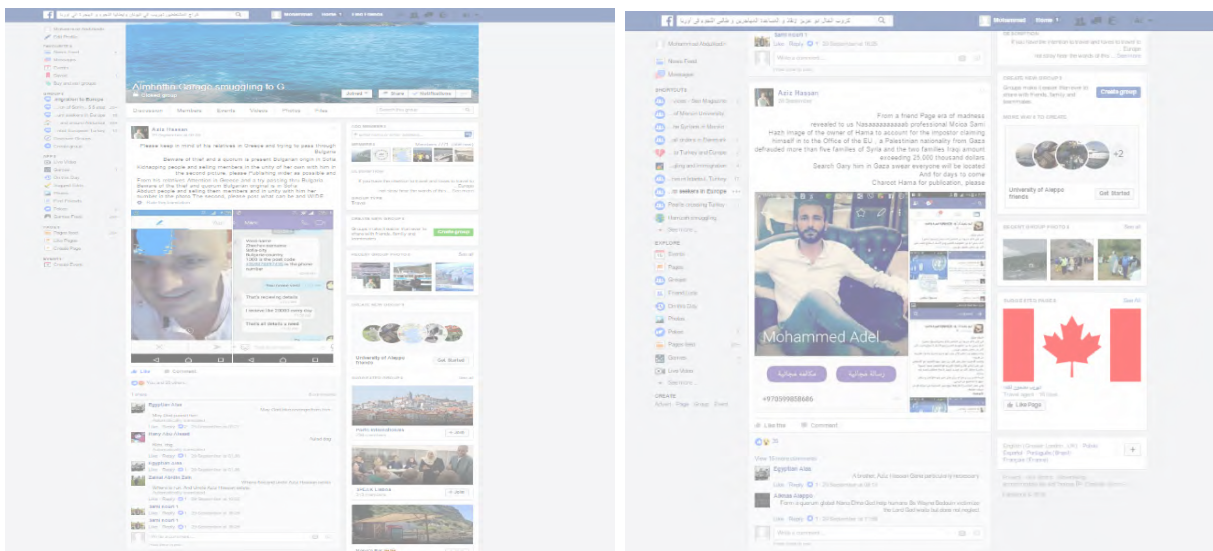
Yes, I have used the internet many, many times! Internet along with mobile phones, of course, is the best to have business from a distance! I have been helping people to come to the UK since 2002. I enjoy being a kacakci [human smuggler]. [...] I used Facebook before I come to England for a year, a year and a half. I had many pages in face book and advertised my services. Transportation, travel to Europe, good prices, best service (Interview with Smuggler 2).

It is important to mention that Smuggler 1 emphasised that often, recruitment took place *offline*, as people who knew them either directly or indirectly, through friends or relatives, and their occupation as

a smuggler would initiate contact in person and make enquiries on how to travel to the UK for themselves or for their relatives. According to Sanchez (2017), those seeking to migrate explore potential smuggling options usually by consulting their friends and relatives who have made and undertaken successful smuggling journeys, often meeting with smugglers in person or chatting via telephone and may meet several smugglers until a suitable option is chosen. Moreover, a small number of smugglers manage to form a client base and positive reputation attesting to the reliability, degree of communication throughout the journey and the quality of the transportation, all of which contribute to the duration of a smuggling enterprise, enabling smugglers to generate and conduct business with prospective customers.

A compelling finding pertaining to the recruitment phase of human smuggling was that some pages, particularly the ones that were more active and popular, would expose fraudulent smugglers who were advertising deceptive transportation services. These posts would often be very lengthy, detailing the unscrupulous smuggler's name, nationality, the country and city they were operating in, how they had defrauded their victim or victims, particularly in regards to payment, with a photograph of the person also attached to the post. Some people would comment on the post to confirm that they too had been deceived by the duplicitous smuggler, and would strongly urge others to be aware and use caution. We speculate that these pages that would routinely uncover deceptive smugglers act as a very effective form of *benevolent recruitment*, by demonstrating that they were looking after and protecting potential migrants by raising awareness of dangerous swindlers masquerading as smugglers, and instilling confidence of their services, which would encourage migrants to making arrangement trips of transportation with these pages instead.

Figure 3. A popular and active smuggling page on Facebook entitled “Uncle Aziz” exposing fraudulent smugglers deceptively claiming to offer transportation services to Europe and the UK, by exhibiting screenshots of Viber chats in which travel arrangements were discussed.



Source: Authors' research

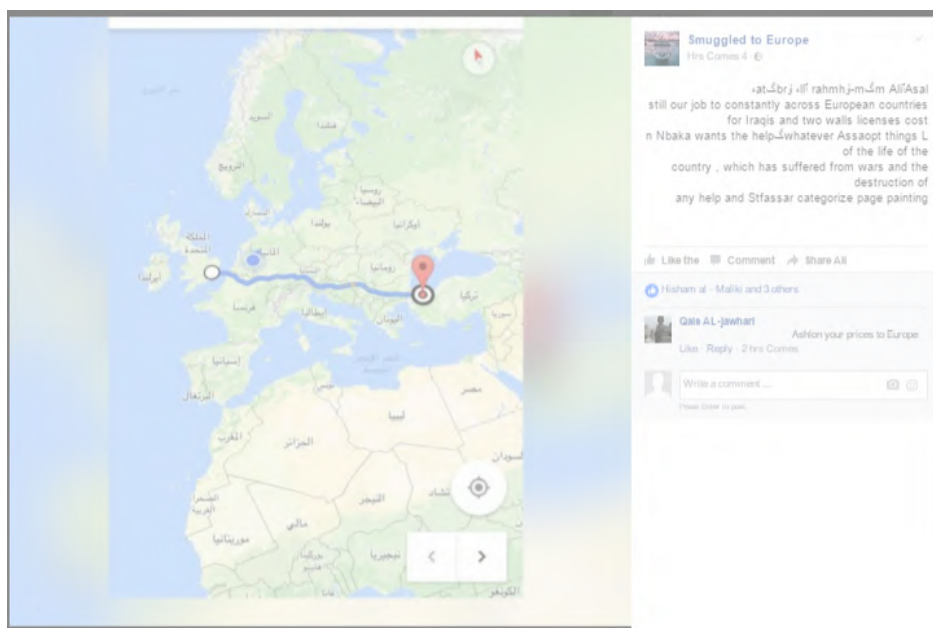
Transportation

We found a significant number of Facebook pages that were actively advertising *transportation* services, including boat, yacht or flight trips and to a lesser extent, land routes where the journey would be made on foot, to various countries in Europe, with one popular method of travel being from Turkey, in particular the cities of Izmir and Mersin, to various islands in Greece, and then utilising various routes to and within an assortment of European countries to the destination of the UK. One of our interviewed

smugglers mentioned that a relative of theirs would advertise the sale of European passports to facilitate transportation and entry to the UK:

My cousin is in France and in his facebook account has a post about European passports. With one of those you get to England with no problem. You just need the money, 800-1000 euros is OK. [On being showed the particular Facebook account, including the advert/post translated from Arabic to English] “Want to buy passport, ID, visa and driving license with no hassle? We make really high quality documents for travel to European countries. We sell only best documents. Guaranteed success. We make perfect passports for UK, France, Germany, Greece, Italy, USA, Canada. Very competitive prices. Discount available for families. The passport can be ready in 5 days. For more information, send an e-mail: jXXXX@gmail.com / tel. 0033 2 99xxxxxx” (Interview with Smuggler 2).

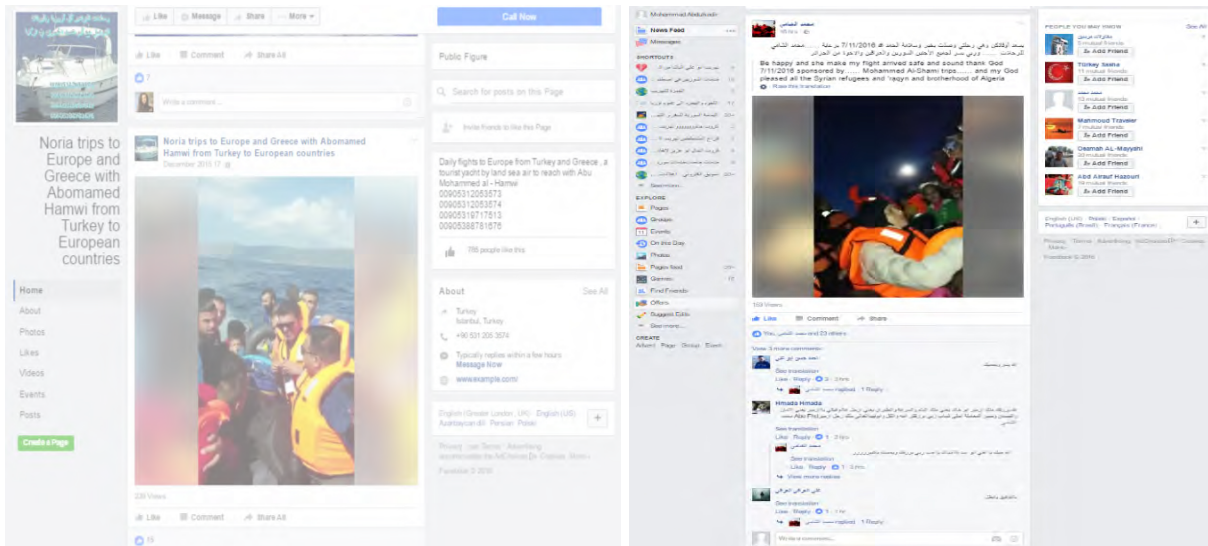
Figure 4. Smuggling page on Facebook named “Smuggled to Europe”, advertising transportation services, and including a screenshot captured from Google Maps that demonstrates a transit route from Turkey to the destination of the UK.



Source: Authors' research

We found that, typically, these pages would post photographs of the particular means of transport, usually of boats, cruise liners and yachts, providing information on its size and dimensions, and the duration of the journey. In addition, these posts would also outline the prices charged for the routes and journey, and include a contact number to make further enquiries. Moreover, by way of perhaps gaining the confidence and trust of potential customers and by extension migrants, we discovered that many of these pages extensively posted photographs and videos of “successful” trips made, both during the journey, and after the destination had been reached.

Figure 5. Screenshots of transportation journeys being undertaken, the first image during the transportation process, and the second after arrival to the destination had been completed.



Source: Authors' research

A box was featured on many of these pages that attested to how quickly the persons behind these pages would reply to messages, with some of the pages marked as “very responsive”, as replying within an hour, and others as “extremely responsive”, responding to messages in minutes. Some pages would also post status updates of successful journeys made, alert potential migrants of adverse weather conditions and of new routes into Europe using screenshots of Google Maps to demonstrate these routes in terms of distance and how to travel through the route without discovery by border guards or officials.

Figure 6. Smuggling page advertising the sale of transportation services, in this instance flight trips to the UK, with communication for further enquiries undertaken via WhatsApp.



Source: Authors' research

Strikingly, we came across numerous instance of the interplay *between* various forms of technology, in this instance between the Internet and mobile phone applications, the most widely used being WhatsApp and Viber. In this regard, we observed that when used in this way by smugglers, Facebook operates as a gateway, in that it introduces potential migrants to services through advertisements, with further communications, most likely to arrange transportation journeys and discuss payment taking place through WhatsApp and Viber, usually through the telephone numbers that were listed in the post. This was the usual method that took place for our interviewed smugglers, in which initial questions would be answered through private chats in Facebook but would then take place via mobile phone to make further arrangements between the smugglers and the clients, or between smugglers working alongside other smugglers:

This [private chats in facebook] was very rare after they contacted me. Most of clients gave me a call; I offered a telephone number in the post, so they called me and made all arrangements. There are a few of, usually very young, people who will send messages in private chat in Facebook. Young boys who are online the whole time and are interested in going to Europe and they may want to ask something before the arrangements are made. You know to ask whether they can come with less money. Maybe because they don't have a phone, I don't know. Most of the people called me and I answer any questions they have (Interview with Smuggler 2).

I just use mobile phones to communicate with my partners in places like Istanbul and Izmir. This is how we take care of business. Once the people get to Greece, there are others who take care of them. I also talk to people I know about the travel and advise them what to do when in Istanbul because Istanbul is very big and people from my town find it difficult. (Interview with Smuggler 1).

Primarily when it comes to the smuggling of Asian and African migrants, all smuggling groups and/or individuals ‘cooperate’ (without even considering it) in an attempt to bring the bulk of migrants from Asia and Africa to the United Kingdom (as well as other countries of Western Europe). This takes place via a smuggler-to-smuggler approach that does not allow irregular migrants to be lost (see Içduygu & Toktas, 2002). Smugglers often unwittingly ‘collaborate’ with other smugglers, and are not known to one another, as they may live and operate in different villages, cities, regions, and countries (see, for example, Sanchez, 2017). In the event of arrest of one of the smugglers, or if the chain is sometimes broken during the journey (e.g., due to policing operations), other individuals, groups and networks, who have no connection with the smugglers of the initial stage, take over in the smuggling migrants. Information and communication technologies are instrumental at this part. Scholars have noted that smugglers and their clients rely on basic mobile phones for communication purposes, alongside social media and to recruit and guide clients, although as Sanchez (2017) points out, this usage is better understood as a reflection of the affordability and availability of mobile technology, rather than as a marker of the technological sophistication of smugglers. Significant sections of the communications that place between various smugglers working together take place through mobile technology, including phone calls, text messages (SMS), as well as WhatsApp and Viber and social media websites. These undertakings, when executed productively and in coordination, will guide clients to their final destination.

Figure 7. Active and popular Facebook pages advertising smuggling services to the UK, as well as Europe, in particular transportation services via yacht and flight trips. Typically, cost breakdowns in Euros are included in the postings, with all further communication regarding these services taking place with phone chats using WhatsApp, through the phone numbers listed.



Source: Authors' research.

As a means of a more active engagement with this aspect of the virtual ethnography, we tried to contact some of the more popular smuggling Facebook pages, in particular those who were likely to respond swiftly to messages. The rationale for this approach was to try and discover whether there were particular pages or smugglers and ‘brokers’ that would be able to provide information on ways of transportation and routes taken to travel, specifically to the United Kingdom. We contacted these pages with a simple inquiry of how it would be possible to travel to the United Kingdom, from Syria as well as the costs involved as a lone traveller for the journey. As a means of initiating conversation, we used an online translation tool to translate text to Arabic, and then proceeded to send messages to the pages via Facebook’s web (and desktop)-based Messenger feature. Whilst some of these pages did indeed provide swift responses, the majority of the time the we were informed that further information could only be discussed through mobile phone applications such as WhatsApp and Viber, with contact numbers provided to do so. However, given that these conversations would be conducted entirely in Arabic, and with us possessing insufficient knowledge of the Arabic language, this, unfortunately, was an impossible, challenging task. Advantageously, however, creating and setting up a Facebook account yielded much data, in that we were able to gain more access and insight into previously inaccessible content, such as relevant smuggling groups and pages.

Figure 8. Initiating and engaging in conversation with a smuggling page on Facebook, enquiring as to the ways in which it would be possible to be transported to the UK, and what routes the journey would entail.



Source: Authors’ research

The smugglers that we interviewed also remarked on the use of the Internet, in particular social media and mobile phones as being key mechanisms in the logistics of the transportation process, specifically keeping in contact with the clients during the transportation journey, as well as the arrival of their clients to the destination and, importantly, the arrangement of payment. Irregular migrants (or their families who very often see the facilitation of their migration as an investment) pay the full or at least 50% of the total smuggling fee in advance. This 50% is in most occasions used towards paying important actors of the journey before the actual journey starts. The rest of the fee is paid upon the

migrants' arrival in the destination country. In many occasions advance payments are made to a middleman, a trusted and prominent member of the local community, who then forwards the payment to the organiser upon the end of the migrants' facilitated journey:

Once we have a customer, I have used facebook and I have also been using e-mail in order to take care of details with regards to the details of the trip from Kurdistan to Istanbul and from Istanbul to Izmir, from Izmir into the Greek islands. Sometimes, especially when I know the person I helped to travel e-mails and facebook are used to let me know that they have reached the destination and to sort out any outstanding money issues. We have to get paid too! You know, where to go and who to pay and so on. Sometimes there are problems any people are getting lost, they cannot find a place to stay, they cannot find someone to talk to, etc. etc. etc. the travel is full of problems and you cannot do this without e-mails, and phones (Interview with Smuggler 2).

As well as advertising transportation services, one of our interviewed smugglers would also provide information on available accommodation and where to charge phones during journeys for which the duration of the trip to the destination country was uncertain:

In most of the places people have to stay [transit points], they need a house, a bed to sleep on. The best way for them to know what is there, cheap places to stay, is facebook. You can find a hotel anywhere in Europe but the problem is that they are very expensive. When they travel for months or even years they want to spend as little money as possible. You never know how long the trip will last, and in some place they ask them for a lot of money, 5 euros for a bottle of water, 10 euros for a sandwich, and some people Greece, in Italy, in France, they ask you 20 euros to let you recharge your mobile battery. So in the internet, in facebook, you can advertise accommodation for as little as 10 euros a night. When people travel, they are always on their mobiles to find the cheapest solutions to their everyday problems... my cousin does the same for cheap rooms. [On being showed a relevant post on Facebook on available accommodation in France] "Cheap rooms in Calais. 15 euros per night, TV included. Common toilet with shower. Clean. Available for families. Discount negotiable. For more information, tel. 0033 2 99xxxxxx"] (Interview with Smuggler 2).

The THB phases

Recruitment

The recruitment of victims is an integral aspect of the human trafficking process. A plethora of websites, including social networking and microblogging services such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as online classifieds, dating and international marriage agency sites (see Jones, 2011), have been documented as recruiting people into trafficking and advertising the sale of their services, for the purposes of sexual or labour exploitation (see Hughes, 2014; Latonero et al, 2011, 2012; Mendel and Sharapov, 2014; Sarkar, 2015; Sykiotou, 2007). In the words of one of the NGO representatives that we interviewed, the Internet, as well as social media sites such as Facebook have been reported as facilitating the recruitment of victims of human trafficking to the UK:

If I constructed a poll of people [victims] that I've asked about how they learnt about jobs, yes, people would say they went on a website for instance, and found a job. So yes, the tricky thing is how to quantify the balance between the human factors and the technological factors, because most people we work with tell us about people that were involved, and yet for me the interesting bit is how did they meet those people? It's all very well saying 'I met a friend', which

is pretty much what everybody tells you, 'I was exploited by a friend', 'a friend introduced me', etcetera, and I don't think there's a process or system yet where we ask the follow-on questions like 'where did you meet that friend?', 'were you connected on Facebook?', 'did you use-', I think the internet yes- social media- the internet yes in terms of recruiting job adverts and social media (Interview with NGO 3).

To lure and recruit victims online, traffickers frequently place spurious, promising advertisements on employment, dating and marriage websites for jobs including: administration, cleaning, home help, child care, waitressing, hostessing, pole dancing, transportation, the collection and delivery of charity bags, agricultural farming and construction roles, educational courses or work in the tourism sector (see also Europol, 2014). Our online research revealed some distinct examples of suspected deceptive recruitment, in that we found advertisements of women selling sexual services on online classifieds that were written in very poor English, advertising women as working in several areas of the UK, such as in Birmingham, Oxford, Newcastle and London, under various aliases. In one instance, in performing a google search of the number listed in the advertisements, we discovered that the same number was present on general employment sites in Lithuania, advertising and recruiting for jobs available in the UK. Such jobs listed were for charity collection and waitress work in the cities of Manchester and London for a high salary of £150-200 a day, in which accommodation and transportation to work were included. However, there was no mention of the company, organisation or the name of the person recruiting for work or the requirement of any qualifications, with the only other information available in the advertisement being the mobile phone number.

In another occurrence, we found that the mobile phone number connected to a dubious advertisement on an online classified website for a woman selling sexual services in London, was also present in the employment section of an online Romanian newspaper for available work in the UK. This particular listing was for “unskilled labour” and mentioned that “conversational English” was preferable. Again, the name of the company or the person posting the advertisement was not disclosed, and nor, more importantly, was the specific job role. In her extensive examination of the role of the Internet in the facilitation of the trafficking of human beings for labour exploitation in several EU Member States, such as the Czech Republic, Ireland, Romania and the UK, Muskat-Gorska (2014) identified the presence of several “red flags” that may indicate that a posted job offer was untrustworthy, and could lead to an unwitting candidate’s exploitation. Such common red flags include: the promise of an unrealistically high salary for an unqualified job, the particular advert possessing only a general description of the job, no address of the company or organisation and the associated contact details of the advertisement containing only a mobile phone number or a general e-mail address for further enquiries. Our findings align with these red flags, and we suspect that these adverts are spurious and act as a means to lure and traffic women to the UK for purposes of sexual and/or labour exploitation. The mobile phone numbers may belong to a trafficking group or network based in the UK, who post bogus advertisements on online classified websites in their native countries and may also arrange the transportation and travel of their targeted victims to the UK.

The production of such sites that are used to recruit and lure victims for sexual exploitation overseas possess a distinctive consistency to them. Websites are frequently created and organised by traffickers in the countries of origin and in the languages of potential victims, with these sites then fostering others, which build up to form national recruitment networks. As such, the content collected through the first website is then used on a second, the aim being to attract clients. Information on the victims that have been recruited is then translated into English, as well as the languages of other sex markets where the traffickers desire to trade. We discovered the presence of a potential trafficking network operating between Bulgaria and Greece, recruiting for young women between the ages of 18-35 to work as escorts in the UK. To a lesser extent, advertisements were also posted in English, recruiting for women of any nationality and physical body shape to work in the Oxford area of the UK, predominantly on the adult jobs section of www.backpage.com/uk. Our analysis and translation into English of the content of the Bulgarian and Greek advertisements revealed that each of the listings, despite the differences in language, contained an extremely similar layout and written information, with the full text of one of the advertisements outlined below:

Ad: Escort for England

£200 – 500 tii (sic) a day

attractive and sexy girls profesionaliski [sic] and not, at the age of 18 to '35 to work in England. knowledge of English is an advantage but not essential. We are looking only serious girls who want to make a lot of money in a short time. for more information, please send current pictures and write to that email address mxxiq11xx@gmail.com

City: Sofia, Bulgaria

Tel: 004407596475xxx

A google search of the e-mail address posted in the advertisement above revealed the presence of several more advertisements placed on both Bulgarian and Greek online classified and adult sex websites, which indicates that this e-mail address is accessed and used by criminal groups or individuals based and operating in Bulgaria and Greece, who respond to enquiries made by potential aspirants regarding the advertisements and may also organise travel and transportation from and between the two countries to the UK. Although all of the advertisements are recruiting women for sex work in the UK as escorts, there is no disclosure of the recruiter, thus it is impossible to determine whether it is an agency, a company or an individual who posted the advertisement. Moreover, there is no description of the terms of the job role, nor the location of the place of work, as well as there being no mention of the daily working hours involved. In one of the other advertisements, we noted the advertisement offered “free accommodation”, yet there was no reference to the location of residence or the type of dwelling, nor whether the accommodation was tied to the workplace. As a report published by the National Crime Agency (NCA) affirms, victims exploited for labour originating from Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Romania stated that they were offered accommodation in the UK as well as transportation to the UK as part of an employment package (see National Crime Agency Strategic Assessment, 2015). We noted that the all advertisements of this nature emphasised that there was “no experience necessary” for the job, and although knowledge of the English language would be advantageous, it was not an essential factor, which would suggest perhaps that women recruited may be advertised as being new to the UK sex market and to working in the sex industry, with emphasis placed on their lack of experience as an escort to attract potential customers or clients. Furthermore, a salient aspect of these advertisements was the aim to recruit “serious women looking to make a lot of money in a short period of time”, with the promise of unrealistically high amounts of money – for an unqualified job and a basic grasp of English – to be earned each day, ranging from £200-500, acting as an effective form of enticement.

What is also highly remarkable about this assortment of Bulgarian and Greek advertisements is that all of them exhibit all of the red flags mentioned earlier. Further casting doubt and arousing our suspicions over the authenticity of these Bulgarian and Greek advertisements is that a google search of the e-mail address, as well as the first half of the e-mail address, given its distinctive name and assortment of numbers, exposed the existence of several profiles of women on adult online classified websites in the UK, including www.backpage.com/uk, www.vivastreet.co.co.uk and www.punternet.com. We found that the profile descriptions for each particular woman all featured the same written information and style of writing, which signifies that these profiles have not been written by the women themselves. These profiles may have been created, penned and posted on several online classified websites by the same criminal group or individuals that also manage the aforementioned advertisements and by extension the women, for recruitment. All of the women in the profiles were advertised as working in Oxford under various mobile phone numbers, although each profile did also feature the same e-mail address as listed in the recruitment advertisements as another means of contact.

A multitude of motivations may have influenced the decisions of these women to travel and perform sex work, by applying for escort jobs abroad. Much of the literature pertaining to migration for the purposes of performing sex work has highlighted that such decisions to migrate are often motivated by a desire for personal advancement, following friends who are perceived as being “successful” and wealthy abroad (see Agustín, 2005; Europol, 2006). Other reasons include supporting family members back in one’s country of origin, wanting to attain a degree of independence, being afforded opportunities to travel and see the world (see Siegel, 2012, 2016), and that actively, many of the women were already working as prostitutes in their native countries. Women are recruited to socialise

and mingle in clubs, pubs, night-time economy (NTE) establishments or in parties of the same ethnic groups (for example Romanian, Bulgarian, Czech, Russian), with traffickers browsing social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter, as well as digital mobile phone apps such as WhatsApp to locate other women who could work in the sex industry. Once potential victims are discovered, they are brought to the pimp or trafficker, who then introduces them to various sex industry venues throughout the country. At this stage, the women are usually aware of the type of work they are going to be introduced in. Petrunov (2014) notes that there has been an evolution in the trafficker-victim relationship concerning recruitment and relocation over the years, where “soft” methods are now most frequently used, rather than the coercion that was typical in the 1990s. In the majority of cases, the consent of the trafficked person is acquired, and the division of earnings is pre-negotiated, with most individuals having been informed about the purpose of the trip, and the type of work they will be undertaking when they have arrived to the destination country. The main factor in the recruitment, is the promise of material gain, with coercion not usually taking place during the recruitment process. One of our interviewed experts recounted a discussion that had taken place with a sex worker who had travelled from her native country of Moldova to work in the sex industry abroad, wherein the woman was receptive of potential risks involved in regards to her personal safety and working environment, yet such dangers were seen as tolerable, as her performing sex work was an investment that would enhance her future trajectory:

I was speaking to a sex worker who was Moldavian... she had some rough times, but the impression you got from talking with her was that all of this were acceptable risks, she was desperate to go out of her country, she was also desperate to send money back to her country, she got into some trouble with a bar owner, yes she was being exploited, but within those margins, she had managed to accomplish a plan that she initially came up with about her life trajectory, “yes I’ll leave my city, go to a different country, do some sex work, work in a bar” and there she was ten years after, and she was okay, or she sounded so, I have no reason to believe any different (Interview with Expert 2).

As some scholars such as Petrunov (2014) assert, one of the main reasons for working in the sex industry is the relatively large amount of earnings, compared with what these women would earn if they stayed in their home countries, accompanied with the ability to make a considerable amount of money in a shorter amount of time. However, in their research examining the recruitment and migration of women to Italy for sex work, Cauduro et al (2009) agree that although the women understand that they will be working as prostitutes, this does mean that they do not undergo sexual exploitation by their traffickers or pimps, or that they exert their will in a completely autonomous manner. Petrunov (2014), who in interviewing over 117 trafficking victims from the three largest ethnic groups in Bulgaria – Bulgarians, Roma and Turks, found that a sizeable number of respondents reported that they had experienced some coercion after they began working in the destination country, is also in qualified agreement. It is important to note, therefore, that whilst these recruited women may have applied to the advertisements listed on the Bulgarian and/or Greek websites with conscious awareness of what the work in the UK will entail, the possibility exists that these women may have underestimated the risks involved and they too, through coercion and threats, may be placed in exploitative situations by their pimps or traffickers.

As some of the NGOs that we interviewed informed us, in their work, the “lover-boy” method, in which a recruiter or trafficker, either operating alone or as part of a larger group, feigns romantic interest in a girl or young woman, and seduces her with promises of marriage and an auspicious future by travelling abroad from the country of origin, and as the relationship develops further, the recruiter or trafficker manipulates or coerces the victim into sexual exploitation through prostitution, is a common tactic in the recruitment of victims to the UK:

Generally, you’ve got ‘loverboy’ situation, people falling in love, then “let’s go travelling, let’s go abroad” and then the other way was just the promise of a job, so an agent or someone in a village would come and offer work, playing on vulnerabilities of poverty, lack of education, etcetera, to try and offer people things that actually don’t really ever exist (Interview with NGO 3).

A trafficker will identify a child in a local community and actually befriend their family or befriend the child, or, in some cases of sexual exploitation, a boyfriend will be actually be used to then traffic a girl into sexual exploitation abroad (Interview with NGO 2).

In addition, direct contact is also initiated with victims in chat rooms or via social networking sites, where traffickers pose as friends or lovers to recruit victims, often exchanging e-mails, messages, photographs and videos with their victims to build a relationship and gain their trust and confidence. NGO 3 stated that in the grooming and recruitment of children for the purposes of sexual exploitation, instead of initial physical contact with the victim, the Internet has enabled similar manifestations to the “lover-boy” tactic to take place online, on a range of social media websites and digital applications:

The more generalised ones, so obviously Twitter, Facebook. We look at sites where there's more chatting going on, so Facebook, where Facebook groups are set up, you're looking at Snapchat, you're looking at WhatsApp, you're looking at those types of apps that traffickers use to access children. If you're looking at Facebook for recruitment purposes, you're seeing traffickers targeting children online, inviting them to chat, and posing as children themselves. So a trafficker will pose as a child to gain a level of trust over a certain period of time, offer gifts, maybe arrange a meeting and in that context, then the child might have already been groomed, but then groomed further into sexual exploitation and commercial or organised sexual exploitation. Obviously, these websites and applications maybe have different purposes and they function in slightly differently, but historically, you're looking at similar forms of grooming just using different technologies and different approaches (Interview with NGO 2).

Another interesting point raised by NGO 3 concerns the usage of social media applications by traffickers to determine how close in proximity, a potential victim is to them, in terms of a nearby town or city, or even within the same locality, thus enabling them to easily track, meet and build up a relationship to gain their targeted victim's trust:

I think probably ID'ing [identifying] locations, so if someone [victim] is using Facebook and had their location on, it's very easy for someone [trafficker] to start assessing whether or not they are local to them, so do they invite them for a coffee or do they invite them to meet them and their friends, so I think social media is used like that, something we've observed is that lots of people we've worked with aren't particularly internet savvy, which means they don't have security settings on correctly (Interview with NGO 3).

Many electronic devices such as mobile phones and tablets have, within their settings, built-in location services functions that enable any third-party applications and websites to use information based on the user's current location, to provide numerous location-based services, such as finding nearby amenities that include parks and restaurants. On this point, if a user has enabled location services, knowingly or unknowingly on their device, then such action would allow social media applications, such as Facebook, and/or Twitter to gain access to and publicly display the user's location to their 'friends', through the user's status updates, uploading of photographs and messages sent via Facebook's Messenger feature, or depending on the user's privacy settings, whoever is able to view their profile. Consequently, the visibility of one's location to others can have negative implications for the user, and possess much benefit for a trafficker searching for women to recruit. NGO representatives interviewed mentioned that many of the victims they had worked with were not shrewd in their use of the Internet and were neglectful in checking their location services settings on their mobile phones. Thus, an imperative aspect of NGO 3's work in supporting victims of trafficking was to spend time educating them on the importance of Internet safety, ensuring that the victims understood the data they were sharing and who could see it, in the hope that doing so would act as prevention of the occurrence of re-trafficking.

Transportation

Thus far, research undertaken into the scale and nature of human trafficking activity has indicated that the UK is primarily a dominant *destination* country for trafficking victims rather than a transit country in trafficking routes (see, for example, Joint Committee on Human Rights, 2006). In 2006, The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), which maintains a Trafficking Database of research reports by inter-governmental, governmental and non-governmental sources on human trafficking trends, reported that within Europe, the UK ranked “high” as a destination country for the trafficking of human beings. Moreover, the UNODC (2006) report noted that the UK is one of the main destinations for children and adults who are trafficked from: Central and South Eastern Europe, the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS); Africa; Asia; Latin America; and the Caribbean. Such findings from the UNODC (2006) report are supported by our interviewed LEAs and NGOs. The Internet has been recognised in facilitating the transportation of trafficking victims, who are normally recruited in their own countries (see European Commission, 2014). NGO interviewees in particular outlined how social media sites have been used to aid the transportation process by among other facilitating the booking of tickets and obtaining travel documentation in several types of transportation:

The Internet and social media sites such as Facebook have enabled young people to contact individuals in neighbouring countries, arranging to meet people they think are friends who have been suggested to help facilitate the transportation of young people into countries when attempting to seek asylum. On arrival and/or through transportation to the destination country, young people have been exploited through labour means (Interview with NGO 1).

I would say yes, because- well I'm sure they facilitate it, in the sense of things like cheap airlines, megabus, all the cheap transport systems, it's really easy for a recruiter to then be booking people on to- it's a faceless booking process isn't it, I think that the Internet does then facilitate the movement of people, by the fact that you can book and then hand tickets out to people (Interview with NGO 3).

Tickets are purchased online by traffickers often by using compromised credit card data, in order to conceal their identities and thereby add another layer of anonymity and distance to their criminal proceedings. Furthermore, the use of stolen credit card information beneficially ensures that the tickets nor the victims are able to be easily linked back to the traffickers. Various methods of conveyance are utilised in the trafficking of victims, such as travelling from the origin country by air direct to the UK via budget airlines, or transport by road through international bus, coach, minibus services (National Crime Agency Strategic Assessment, 2015), or by truck and private car, which has been noted as offering more flexibility than air or train (see Dimitrova, 2006). Furthermore, routes and entry procedures also differ, contingent on the country of origin, the *modus operandi* of the traffickers, and the personal circumstances of the victim (see, for example, Constantinou et al., 2015). An account of the logistics involved in the transportation of children to the UK for purposes of exploitation was provided to us by NGO 2:

Oftentimes, children will be brought in directly through ports, for example airports, Dover, you'll notice that the largest number of children identified in a London local authority will be in Kent, and the largest number of children going missing from a local authority have also been in Kent, so that's predominantly because the port there. So you'll see a disproportionate number of children actually in areas where there are ports, so children are brought through either on false passports, or on their own passports, unaccompanied or accompanied and not identified by border staff. So you do have a lot of issues surrounding identification and you also see children, particularly those recruited for criminal activities rather than illegally enter on lorries, the back of lorries. There was a case recently where there were four or five children were identified in Kent, and then subsequently went missing in 24 hours (Interview with NGO 2).

It is salient to acknowledge that transportation to the destination is frequently executed legally, as during the transportation phase, the victims move voluntarily and co-operate with the traffickers, as they believe that they are going to work at a legitimate job. In particular, for countries in Europe that are part of the EU, the principle of freedom of movement within them has granted a legal possibility for nationals of EU member states to enter and cross the border of transit and destination countries legally, with their own travel documents, which has resulted in difficulties in prevention within the transportation stage (see also Savona et al., 2013). After the accession of former Eastern Bloc countries in the EU, female nationals from Eastern Europe could freely and legally travel to the UK - among other countries - to study at the university or work in various sectors of the economy. These opportunities, which obliged traffickers to alter their approach since their potential victims were empowered to approach the authorities, since the possibility of deportation was not present. This has been the case with the rise of the Internet and mobile phones, which gave more freedom to sex workers to work independently, but at the same time, also gave criminals more opportunities for control by for instance, allowing pimps to communicate directly with clients as well as giving them the capacity to regularly control the women.

An ICT-related issue associated with the transportation process is forged documents. We identified much evidence of forged documents as a possible means of facilitating the transportation of trafficking victims to the UK, through conducting part of our virtual ethnography on the deep web. Using the Tor web-browser and search engines such as 'Grams', 'TorSearch' and 'TORCH', in the same manner as we would with the surface web, we found a deluge of darknet markets, such as 'Fake ID', 'Forgery Store', 'Onion Identity Services' and 'Valhalla', that were selling counterfeit travel documents, such as passports, as well as markets that were advertising the sale of identity papers, including drivers' licenses, identity (ID) cards and birth certificates that were available for all nationalities. Aside from being able to cross borders under legal pretences, such documentation is highly useful for acquiring bank accounts, applying for loans or being to rent property, particularly in the destination country once arrival has been made to the intended location. Although such contraband items are also obtainable to purchase on the surface web, the assurance of anonymity and the protection of the users' identities, resulting in a lower risk of detection from law enforcement within the infrastructure of the dark web, is of high appeal to potential buyers and marketplace sellers who partake in illicit (or licit) web transactions and/or communication exchanges. As one of our interviewed experts on cybercrime trenchantly asserted, in such online endeavours, there may be a broad range of criminal actors involved, spanning from those with rudimentary experience of the Internet, to those who possess much technological adeptness (see also Treadwell, 2012), such as accessing the dark web to engage in illicit trade:

So then I suppose the other thing to look at is how much do you need to be technically-savvy or not in this trade to be able to use the technology... It's probably anywhere from a really tech-savvy person through to a person using Facebook and not really knowing that much else about technology. Most of the time you find it all runs on a continuum, from really highly skilled IT people through to your average everyday person (Interview with Expert 1).

Traffickers may be connected to criminal networks that are highly-organised that may also be linked to domestic networks, or, they may operate locally on a very small level (see also Sarkar, 2015). In this instance, "buyers" may include members of a criminal organisation, such as a trafficking gang, or a lone trafficker purchasing documentation on behalf of their recruited victims. Or conversely, such members may be buying documentation for themselves to accompany their recruited victims, as a way of obscuring their real identities when travelling abroad. We noted that, depending on the particular vendor, the means of payment for the purchase of such documentation was through traditional forms of currency such as the Euro (€), or via Bitcoin (฿)⁵, a decentralised peer-to-peer payments network and a

⁵ Since its inception in 2008, the usage of Bitcoin has grown to such an extent that it is now able to be used as a form of payment for the purchase of sexual services, as evidenced by one UK-based escort agency in the city of Birmingham, Passion VIP, accepting payments in bitcoin as an alternative and discreet payment method, in what has been termed as "the world's first bitcoin brothel" (Blue, 2013), signifying possible future trends in the interplay between innovative technologies and the sex industry.

virtual currency that essentially functions as online cash (see Brito and Castillo, 2013). Many of the counterfeit documents for sale on various darknet markets were claimed by the sellers to possess very high levels of authenticity, with some stating that their documents had been “tested and working fine all around the world”, enabling one to travel freely and unproblematically without triggering suspicion, as well as passing standard cursory inspection procedures at post offices and for person-to-person payment transfer services in which money can be sent or received, such as MoneyGram and Western Union. Similarly, some sellers of passports available to purchase stated that there were no issues with travelling and entering another country, as the passports could also, for extra money, be affixed with visa stamps as well as being registered within official government databases of the destination country to avert suspicions and discovery. Technological capabilities have enabled further counterfeiting to take place, because not only can better fakes be developed at reduced prices, but advancements in ICT links dispersed locations in global trade relations, which makes the formation of networks of buyers and sellers and the exchange of money relatively straightforward. This has become especially discernible since the Internet and e-commerce by producers and consumers became widespread, with the Internet acting as a “time/space compressor, on the one hand connecting sellers with large numbers of consumers in dispersed locations and on the other offering the formation of transient relationships between (cyber)criminal entrepreneurs” (Hall and Antonopoulos, 2016: 23).

A key feature of transnational trafficking is the complexity in its undertaking, in which to successfully transport a person to a country or across a continent, there is the requirement of valid, or purported to be valid and genuine passports, visas or other documentation that allows entry into the destination country. Alongside travel documentation, there is also the necessity of international transportation, local transportation in both the country of origin and the destination country, the supervision of the victim, or victims, during the travel, and a way to collect and control the victim upon arrival at the intended destination, before the exploitation begins, which are strategies that often involve a group of people to varying extents. In this respect, the organisation of such a transregional trafficking operation, where the transportation of victims internationally is a key feature that is frequently necessitated by more skills and capital rather than the establishment of a more geographically confined venture. The investments made by traffickers into the trafficking process – especially the transportation phase – are related to the anticipated profits as the traffickers aim to maximise their return, analogous to any other business.

Exploitation

In 2016, the most common type of human trafficking recorded for both adult and child (minor) victims in the UK was trafficking for the purposes of labour exploitation (National Crime Agency, 2017). Labour traffickers operate across the UK and exploit workers in low-skilled areas of work such as car washes, cleaning services, nail bars, restaurants as well as seasonal agricultural work, such as the cultivation of cannabis plants. In addition, the wages of these victims, alongside any state benefits that have been fraudulently claimed in their names are frequently paid into bank accounts that are controlled and managed by traffickers (National Crime Agency, 2016). From our interview data, some of the LEAs and NGOs also attested to labour trafficking and exploitation commonly occurring in these sectors of work and establishments:

There have also been cases where members of the Eastern European community, and the Middle-East, some Kurdish men have been paid very low wages working in car washes or in fast food establishments. But, the wages paid to them on behalf of the gang they're working for, who provide the tied accommodation they're living in, the wages are never actually seen and are instead used to pay for the accommodation, and then the accommodation is so overcrowded and cold, and without running water, you're basically living in a shit-hole, and then you work all day for nothing (Interview with LEA 2).

There's a wide range of different manifestations... some of it are people who are being used for benefit fraud and some of it is helping organised criminals in terms of cannabis farms, and some of it can even extend into domestic servitude, where people

are recruited in other countries, to come and work for professional people and be paid next to nothing and work seven days a week... there's also things like car washes, tanning salons, sunbed places, nail bars, massage parlours, there's a whole range of casual services that victims are recruited for... People are often used and brought over for benefit fraud, I know a friend who used to volunteer at the Citizen's Advice Bureau, and he said that quite often, people would turn up with disreputable looking characters accompanying them, and they would be seeking to get advice and register for benefits (Interview with LEA 1).

In instances where children have been trafficked to the UK, one NGO asserted that there was a striking degree of convergence and overlap within the types of exploitation that child victims have experienced:

The most common forms of exploitation would sit within two broad categories. So child trafficking for sexual exploitation, and child trafficking for labour exploitation. Now you can break that down in many different ways, and you can also see intersectionality within forms of exploitation... where you see domestic servitude, you might also see sexual exploitation, where you see a male who has been trafficked to the UK under the guise of football, for football purposes, you might then be exploited sexually. Or a child who is exploited for criminal activity, who is maybe into street crime, pick pocketing things like that, [they] might also be exploited sexually, so intersectionality... we've even seen a case of organ harvesting (Interview with NGO 2).

From the virtual ethnography, we identified a multitude of advertisements recruiting for work in the UK, placed on numerous online classified websites and Facebook pages in numerous languages that were consistent with the red flags as outlined earlier, in an array of fields, such as construction, agriculture, health and beauty. In some circumstances, we found that the mobile phone number listed in the advertisements was, when searched for on google, connected to profiles of women in the UK that were selling sexual services, either on online classified websites or adult entertainment sites, with the original advertisement making no mention of sex work and being in a completely different job sector.

It is important to state that, despite widespread use of the Internet and digital technologies, not all victims of trafficking would have been recruited and exploited through the use of these mediums, given that informal 'offline' forms of recruitment, such as word-of-mouth, or through friends and relatives is still a very pervasive and efficient method of trafficking individuals into situations of exploitation. This type of recruitment is still extensive in rural areas or among particular communities such as Roma or other minority ethnic communities or within peer groups, with traffickers often going to the families of victims directly. One interviewed NGOs stated that such tactics were deployed by traffickers recruiting and transporting targeted victims to the UK for labour exploitation:

In our experience in Nigeria, you'll have someone who befriends a family, offers the opportunity of education and employment abroad... so it could be a male person or someone not directly related to the criminal organisation that is paid to befriend the family and offer these opportunities and then smuggle them into the UK for purposes of exploitation... (Interview with NGO 2).

One interviewed LEA mentioned that Vietnamese minors were frequently trafficked to the UK for purposes of labour exploitation to work on farms and coastlines to cultivate plants and cockles, with traffickers, as part of an organised crime syndicate, visiting impoverished families to recruit young victims, and exploiting sociocultural factors of family honour and providing for one's family through working as potent forms of debt-bondage:

When you look at a lot of the other places in the country, where you've got cockle farms in Cumbria to your big fruit farms in Kent, there seems to be a predominance there. Cleveland is a small area. So that was across a number of reasons, some relating to sexual exploitation where some were trafficked, but the majority were Vietnamese minors who had been trafficked basically for labour exploitation, on cannabis farms. So there, the

understanding is, Vietnam, poor family, organised criminals in Vietnam say 'right, we'll give you whatever [payment], this is your money, send so and so [the trafficked victim(s)] to the UK, they're now going to pay off the debt'. What that means for us is that we've now got a safeguarding issue because they're a child, a child who won't comply, because generally, a child from Vietnam, they're much more streetwise than our kids, you've got a child who feels it is an honour to pay back the family debt, you've got a child who feels that their family will be seriously harmed or murdered if they don't pay off the debt, and you've a child who probably still think that their life is still better here than it was in Vietnam. So, with those issues, you've got a non-compliant victim, and non-compliant adult. The ages we are talking about are 13-14 years old... because of- certainly in Vietnam and it isn't much different in Eastern Europe is that money ties you in coercion, because you have always be in fear of your family, so is the debt ever paid? It's quite depressing really (Interview with LEA 2).

Discussing trafficking for purposes of labour exploitation, one NGO asserted that this type of trafficking possessed a distinctly offline dimension, where it was most likely to be shrouded in secrecy, most probably due to the illegal status of some trafficked victims:

But I cannot believe, because we are a reception centre, it would make sense if you were coming through Tees port to be integrated quite easily without anyone knowing, unless the UKBA find out. There have been police raids on some restaurants, where illegal immigrants have been working in those restaurants, not saying they were trafficked necessarily, but they were illegals, so there was that illegality going on. Because it tends to be in houses, it's either domestic slavery or farms... we don't have the farmlands that they have in the South-East where I know there's more trafficking into farm labour. Barnardo's have engaged in work where they have uncovered young boys being exploited to carry drugs to another part of the area, internal trafficking it might be for drugs. There's lots going on, some we're aware of and that's published, and some we're not aware of... If everybody keeps quietly, and it's quietly done in somebody's house and nothing's being said, you know if they're out on the criminality side of things, in terms of not being seen... you know brothels, whose going to look at that unless somebody's been in there that's purchasing? Who's going to look cannabis farms, kept quiet because it's about providing drugs, supply and demand. And labour for domestic servitude, where you know, nobody's going to say that their maid has been brought over illegally or trafficked are they? (Interview with NGO 4).

The Internet has also augmented the nature of sex work from a predominantly physical environment to an increasingly virtual landscape to such an extent that most prostitution is currently advertised and solicited online (see also Ibanez and Suthers, 2014; Finn and Stalans, 2016), in what has been referred to in the literature as “virtual red light districts” (Cauduro et al, 2009: 59; Ibanez and Suthers, 2014; Perer, 2012). Correspondingly, there has been a significant shift in human trafficking activity for the purposes of sexual exploitation to the virtual sphere, with both the supply and demand side having benefitted from the use of the Internet and digital technologies, with trafficked victims often being advertised online. The majority of our findings gleaned from the virtual ethnography pertain to human trafficking concerning sexual exploitation, in particular the exploitation of young women.

We noted that typically, each advertisement of a woman posted on the online classified and adult sex websites we were researching included: a title, the name or alias of the listed woman, a textual profile description which would often include information on the physical attributes of the woman, such as her height, weight and breast size, photographs of the featured woman, the location of the town or city she was based as working in, and a mobile phone number for contact purposes. More infrequently, we also noted that some advertisements contained videos of the advertised woman dancing or posing in a provocative manner, stated nationality and/or ethnicity of the woman, the woman's age, and whether the woman was listed with another woman in the advertisement, for example as a “duo”, sometimes with corresponding photographs of the two to demonstrate this was the case, and the inclusion of an e-mail address as another means of contact, alongside the mobile phone number. On this specific issue, it has been emphasised by researchers such as Konrad et al (2016: 6)

that great difficulty lies in “discerning whether the [suspected] victim is in any capacity a willing participant rather than a victim of fraud, threat, or coercion through posted advertisements and personal encounters”, and remains to be an assignment that is fraught with complications. As we could not be entirely sure of whether the women featured in such advertisements and websites were actual victims of human trafficking, we were careful to use cautionary descriptions, such as “potential”, “possible” or “suspected” victims. Moreover, our findings demonstrate a wide assortment of nationalities, including Hungarian, Czech, Spanish, Moldavian, Ukrainian, Brazilian, Italian, Chinese, Japanese and Romanian⁶ women. However, it is important to note that whilst these women are listed under these nationalities, in reality, this may not be a true representation. We will now discuss the most salient patterns and themes that emerged from this specific aspect of the virtual ethnography. Predictably, the first theme is the very visibility of online sexual exploitation as part of the trafficking process:

It [the Internet] has certainly facilitated the sexual exploitation of children, it's certainly facilitated the exploitation of women in the sex industry and men that actually... the necessity to be on a street corner anymore is less because they can be accessed in a different way, and that's the same for children. So, there will be sites or ways of communicating on the internet, and it may not be Twitter or Facebook, it may be other models [websites and applications] that we don't even know. We are having a situation now where young men and women are being groomed online for, maybe joining ISIS or involved in terrorist groups. So if that can be done, then don't say to me that the Internet can't facilitate also putting people together who are quite willing to exploit others, for all sorts of different reasons (Interview with NGO 4).

People are purchasing sexual services, and the Internet is a really easy place to use that, mobile phones- so you're in a new city for work, you log onto your phone, download an app and say 'oh yep, I can visit X, Y and Z', so I think there is definitely technology being used to facilitate the supply and demand. Yes, for labour, because of the recruitment sites, but I think the sexual exploitation is more apparent, because there are actual pictures of women online that someone purchasing a service can make a decision on, so that's using the technology (Interview with NGO 3).

Definitely in terms of online sexual exploitation, live-streaming of child sexual abuse has become a new phenomenon, and it has definitely fuelled more child trafficking and more sexual abuse, whether done by family members or organised crime networks, it's something we've seen contribute to a rise in sexual exploitation. But we have also seen a rise in identification and prosecution of offenders (Interview with NGO 2).

Our virtual ethnographic research regarding human trafficking and exploitation in the UK sex markets revealed the importance of the mobile phone number listed within advertisements on online classifieds, for several key reasons. Firstly, the mobile phone number serves as the nexus between the virtual and real-world physical environments, as it enables a prospective purchaser of sex browsing *online* to connect to a potential seller of sex and plan an *offline* (and almost certainly sexual) encounter. Secondly, we detected in several advertisements that the listed mobile phone number, when searched for on google and also by using the search function available on various online classifieds, revealed the existence of several more women also advertised as selling sexual services, frequently in various cities across the UK as well some women also working in the same locality. Thirdly, in many instances, a google search of the mobile phone number also demonstrated that the same woman had multiple other profiles on various online classifieds and sex sites, in which she was listed under numerous aliases, ages and, in her earlier profiles, as working and based in various cities in the UK. As such, the mobile phone number listed in such advertisements can serve as an important indicator of potential human trafficking activity. The advertisement of several women under one number, either within the same city

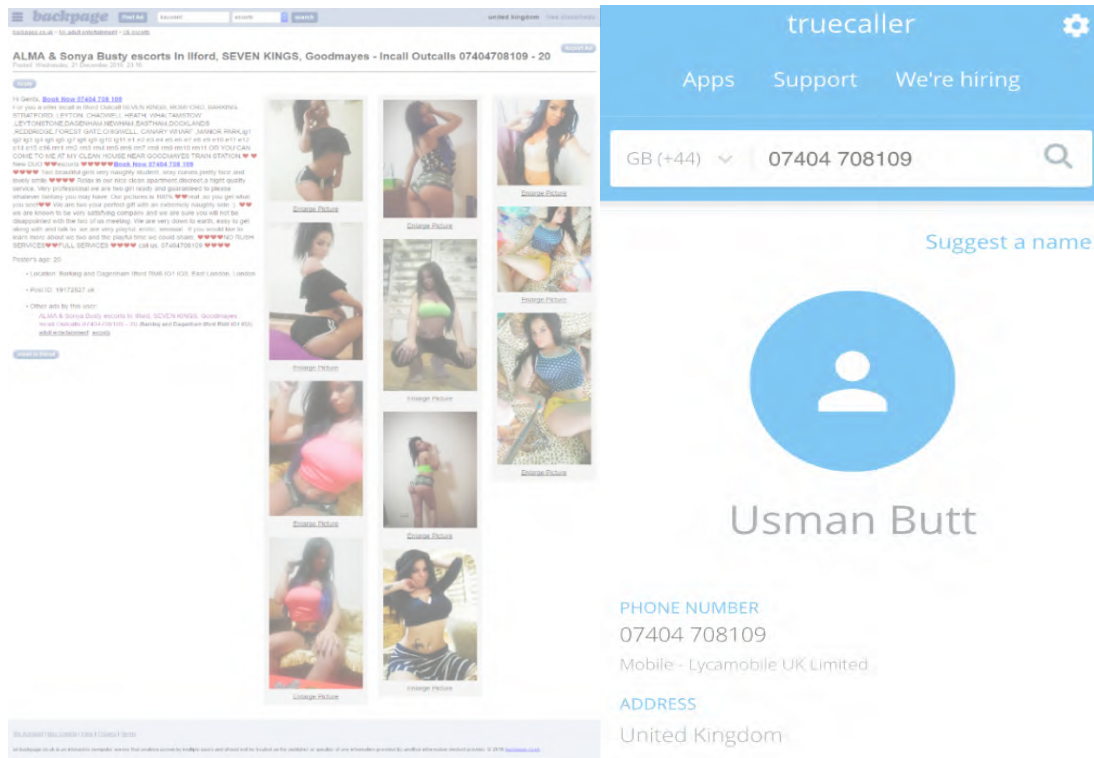
⁶ Romania has consistently been reported as being the most prevalent country of origin for potential victims of trafficking in the UK, with more than half of victims being exploited for sexual purposes (National Crime Agency Strategic Assessment, 2015).

or multiple cities, suggests a “shared management” situation, in which the women do not work as independent escorts, and may be under the control of a trafficking gang or network or a pimp, who control their profiles, are in charge of the mobile phone as well as subsequent bookings made. Likewise, a google search of the phone number of a sole woman advertised is also useful to discern whether the woman has been previously advertised in different locations in the UK, indicative of frequent movement to various locations across the UK, which can signify that the woman may be a victim of trafficking.

Further highlighting the significance of mobile phone numbers in our virtual ethnography was our use of a digital app and corresponding website called ‘Truecaller’⁷ which allows mobile phone numbers to be searched for in a database of over two billion mobile phone numbers, to see name of the person that the phone is registered to, as well as the location of the phone and the mobile phone carrier that the phone is connected to. Whereas our google search of the number listed in advertisements revealed the presence of other advertisements of women who are listed under the same number, we were able use Truecaller to search for the mobile phone numbers we had highlighted in our research as being linked to suspicious advertisements, and discovered that frequently, the number was registered to a person that was not listed in the advertisements, and in many instances the name of the person was male. This discrepancy between the name or names of the women in the advertisements where the number is listed as a point of contact, to the number being registered in the name of another, male person, strongly suggests that the person may be a trafficker or pimp who manages and controls the women, and may arrange bookings for them. Although we stress that using Truecaller did not result in all of the highlighted numbers being registered in another person’s name, or even registered at all, we did find that many of the numbers were listed under the Lycamobile phone operator, a large and popular ‘Pay-as-you-go’ network. The possession of ‘pay-as-you-go’ phones has been observed as being used by criminal networks such as traffickers and/or smugglers for operational and coordination purposes, as well as to maintain constant contact with their victims to facilitate their exploitation, where mobile phones are often prepaid, or ‘Pay-as-you-go’, so that they are unable to be connected to a specific individual through a service contract (see also Ibanez and Gazan, 2016a, 2016b).

⁷ See www.truecaller.com

Figure 9. List of women advertised under a sole mobile phone number, registered in the name of another person.



Source: Authors' research

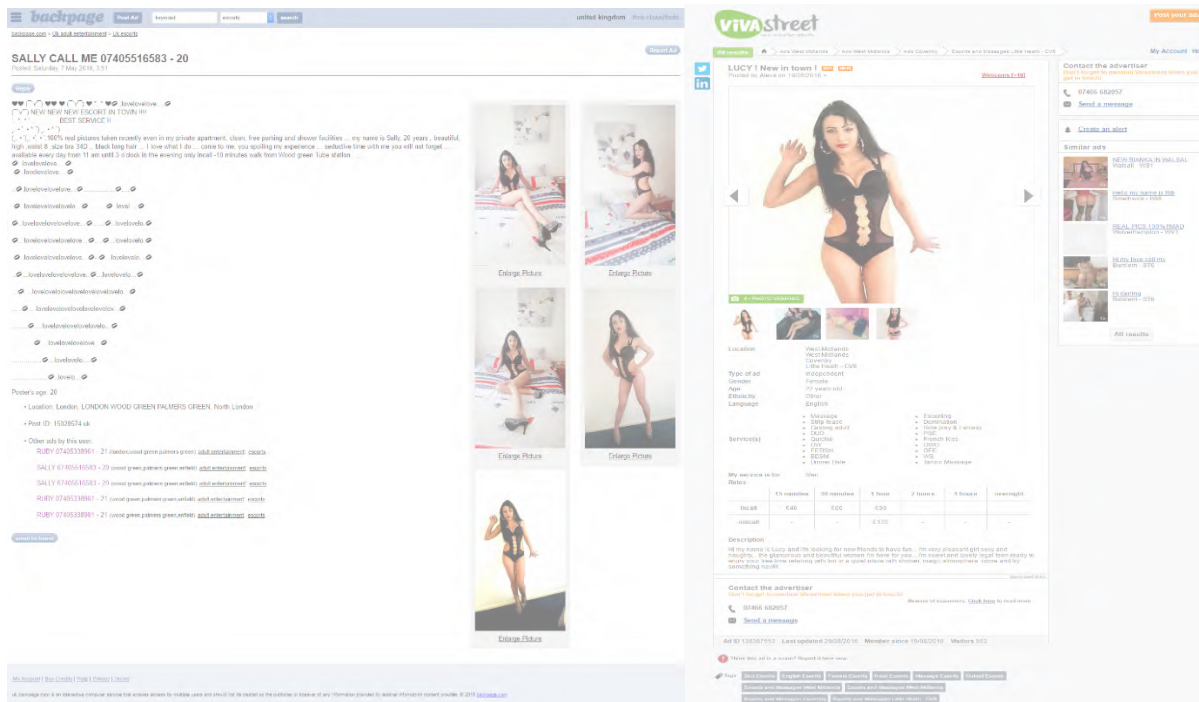
Movement to or within the UK

Due to the extremely large number and volume of posts featured on the various online classified websites and social networking sites that we were studying, it would have been impossible to try to conduct meaningful analyses on all of the advertisements. Therefore, we made the decision to primarily focus our investigations on advertisements that possessed transient language indicative of movement to the UK or within the UK, given that a key feature of trafficking is the rapid rotation and movement of women from city to city. Such search terms used for this purpose were: “new”, “new in town”, “new for you”, “new in/to your city”, “fresh”, “just arrived”, etc. We discovered several women listed under these various terms, with google searches of the connected mobile phone numbers in some of their advertisements revealing that they were listed alongside other “new in town” women. In one striking example, we found the presence of a potentially widespread trafficking ring operating in several areas of London, in which several Eastern European women were listed as being “hot new girls”, “sexy girls”, new VIP party girls”, or “new girls in London” under the same set of mobile phone numbers, and with all profiles exhibiting the same writing style. All of these points would strongly suggest that the advertised women had recently been moved to the UK for purposes of sex work.

Furthermore, we were also able to identify how dynamic these types of profiles delineated as “new” or “new in town” were. A frequent pattern that emerged was the set-up of several profiles of women all listed as “new girls” or “new in town”, who were typically advertised together, sometimes within the same advertisement, offering “duo services”, with photographs of some of these women demonstrating that they were working in the same residence. In these particular profiles, the written profile descriptions for many women being written in an extremely similar style in regards to grammar, syntax and spelling, as well as these women also being listed under the same mobile phone number. Sometimes the exact same profile information was copied and pasted to each profile, except for the aliases. After a few weeks, all of these profiles were removed and the women would “disappear”. However, following a brief period of time, new profiles would be created, either in the same locality or a new area, in which the same woman or a group of women, were once again extensively advertised under new aliases and listed as being “new in town”. This may be due to the women being moved onto

another city in the UK by a trafficking gang or network or pimp to perform sex work, and to evade detection by removing the older profiles and creating new aliases to be advertised under.

Figure 10. Young Romanian woman, predominantly advertised in the Palmer's Green area of London under several aliases of “Sally”, “Yasmina”, “Jessika”, with a group of Romanian women, who have all been advertised under various aliases. This particular woman has also been advertised under the alias of “Lucy” in Coventry in the West Midlands, with her profiles on online classified websites possessing many inconsistencies in her purported age, and nationality, where she is listed as Italian, but her AdultWork profile attests her nationality as being Romanian.



Source: Authors' research

A key feature of trafficking that has been consistently noted is that women are frequently moved from city to city and area to area, the purpose being to disorientate the victims in order to keep them isolated and prevent them from developing friendships that can function as social support systems, and gaining familiarity with their surroundings (see, for example, Dimitrova, 2006). Concurrently, this advantageously prevents detection by law enforcement and intelligence gathering activities. The transportation of women between cities and countries is an important part, not just of the trafficking process, but also for the sex market. Traffickers are aware that clients constantly desire new women to purchase sex from. Through frequent movement in and out of various cities, they make sure that victims are constantly circulated to entice sex purchasers, ensuring a continuous supply of a new stream of women who are often advertised as being “new”, “new in town” or “new in the UK” (Hagstedt et al, 2009) to meet demand. In the online context, Konrad et al (2016: 3) have termed this method as “dynamic adaptation”, citing the *modus operandi* of some sex trafficking rings that advertise victims on particular websites, often altering some small details associated with the advertised name of the victim, or the featured phone number as a way to evade law enforcement. As Konrad et al (2016) argue, making such adjustments results in difficulties for rudimentary pattern-matching tools to track repeated advertisements. In the case of a potentially trafficked young woman we came across under the alias of “Shaila”, we found that she was subject to a review on www.ukpunting.com that raised interesting points:

...Shaila's profile says she's Persian, which attracted me. When I got there, she said she was Pakistani. When I asked where in Pakistan she was from, she said it's not important. I suspect

she's actually Eastern European from her looks, accent, how good her English is (pretty good) and how she confused Persia with Pakistan.

The above excerpt is telling in that the poster remarks that “Shaila” refers to herself as being of Pakistani ethnicity and not Iranian/Persian as she has been advertised under extensively on various online classified websites. This signifies a prominent discrepancy in her *advertised* and verbally *self-reported* ethnicity, in that it signifies that “Shaila” may not be aware that her multiple profiles list her as being Iranian/Persian, which would indicate that her profiles may have been written and controlled by another party. The punter posting their review on the forum suspects that based on her physical appearance and accent, in actuality, “Shaila” may be of Eastern European nationality. It may be that “Shaila” has been told to describe her ethnicity as being Pakistani to enquiring clients, perhaps as a way of sounding more ‘exotic’, as it has been noted that ‘trying something new’, in regards to nationality and aesthetic physical features considered to be ‘exotic’, is a strong motivator for some clients to experience and purchase sex with a sex worker (see, for example, Cauduro et al., 2009).

Analysis of the profile text

Analysing the written profile texts of women within advertisements revealed several compelling insights. Firstly, we found that many of the profiles, particularly those listed as “new” or “new in town” were written in very poor English, and were replete with several grammatical errors, deficient syntax and several spelling and punctuation mistakes. From our virtual ethnographic analysis of forums, we found that some punters were even able to state specific examples of browsed profiles that they thought were highly dubious, in numerous threads:

I do not know if it applies nationwide but in our area Vivastreet advertisements almost all begin with NEW GIRL IN TOWN and have the most nonsensical profile descriptions; every girl possesses every possible virtue and will give you the best experience of your life! It reads like some moron has copied out a few thesaurus entries combined with erotica's most overused cliches. Nothing useful regarding actual services is usually given and the site has no review system. Clearly written by a pimp and very unlikely the girls even know what is written about them. [Placebo88, 2016]

In a particularly illuminating post, one poster discussed his observances of a large group of Romanian women working in his home town, all of whom possessed identically written profiles and were working in the same residence, which was previously used by a group of Eastern European women who have since moved on:

This is getting stupid. I've mentioned these before but the number of similar profiles grows. All of these profiles have almost identical wording. If they are all genuine then it may be a "super-brothel"... Basingstoke is not really awash with options so to have 6 such similar profiles really leaps out. Most likely both Romanian as 3 of the other 4 admit. The pictures are different enough that they are not obviously duplicate profiles. Has anyone seen any/several of them? I think they are all using in the same house as another batch of mainly EU girls who seemed to show up just before Christmas and stay for around 3 months, then get replaced by this lot [mh, 2013]

Secondly, we discovered that several women, especially those who were listed under the same mobile phone number, all possessed extremely similar written profile information (see also Nagpal et al., 2015), in regards to the writing style and services offered, with only the aliases of the women being different. Some profiles, although they were not connected by a common mobile phone number, had the inclusion of special characters in the titles and text, such as hearts, stars, flowers and the inclusion

of Emojis⁸, which were arranged in such an uncommon way that it would indicate that the profiles were written by the same individual or group.

Figure 11 A set of profiles that were listed on Backpage, most likely posted consecutively, all featuring the same arrangement of peach-fruit emojis in the titles of each listing, the names of each woman in the same distinctive style of capital letters, as well of the women being based as working in the same area of Edinburgh city. Each of these profiles all featured similar writing styles, where some of the women were listed as ‘new to/in the UK’ or ‘fresh’, indicating recent movement and arrival to the UK. Some of the photographs were of very high-quality, suggesting that they were taken professionally, the presence of which can indicate a group with access to a large amount of money and facilities (see Di Nicola et al., 2015). We found that each profile also contained a link that stated ‘other ads by this user’, strongly suggesting that these profiles of the women have all been written and under control of the same user, who may be a pimp or trafficker. It is also interesting to note that all of these profiles have all been deleted, indicating that the women may have been moved to other cities in the UK to perform sex work.



Source: Authors’ research

In their investigative work exploring the demand for trafficked prostitution in Sweden and factors that endorse or inhibit the business of trafficking, Hagstedt et al (2009) assert that in terms of advertisements, the same style or layout being used in numerous adverts can act as a sign of an ‘organised’ sex trade. Thirdly, on some profiles, several excerpts of the woman’s profile description were found to have been copied and pasted from other escort profiles in the UK. Moreover, some of the women’s profiles contained very little information and instead made references to specific sexual acts either in the title post or actual profile text, such as, “OWO” (oral sex without condom) “CIM” (ejaculation in mouth), “ANAL” (anal sex), “no unlimited times” (being able to orgasm as many times as wanted or as physically capable in one session), and “full services” (all oral, vaginal and anal sexual services and acts available), all-inclusive for around £70-80 an hour. Disturbingly, many of the featured women were seen to be advertising unprotected sex for the same price.

As a useful comparator, we spent some time examining the profiles of established escort women based and working in the UK as well as lurking on forums⁹ connected to websites that provide support and advice to sex workers in the UK. In these particular profiles, the profile descriptions were composed in an idiosyncratic writing style in which it was quite evident that the content was written by the women themselves, as they featured unique phrases, wording (we also copied and pasted some excerpts on

⁸ Emojis are ideograms that are used in electronic messages and web pages. They encompass facial expressions, types of weather, common objects, places and animals.

⁹ See www.saafe.info, a dedicated website and forum offering support and advice for sex workers in the UK.

google to see if they were present elsewhere) as well as services offered. We also found that 'standard' penetrative sex with condom was offered for £100, and 'extras', such as performing oral sex without a condom or for anal sex with condom were advertised as available for a further £10-20. On forums, we also discovered similar, impassioned sentiments towards unprotected sex without a condom in several threads, entitled 'bareback' and 'Bareback for 50 [£]':

Bareback? Not even for all the gold of this world!!! My health is very important! Some clients are really stupid [Pearl, 2012]

iv been looking at aw [adultwork website] and other website and im shocked how many will do bareback i dont understand why would girls will do it some charge extra 20 or 30 [£] some dont charge any more sorry if any one reading this that does bb [bareback sex] im not beening [sic] nasty but once you get aids theres no going back no cure just a slow painful death saying all that most that do bb are fully booked the money rolling in and just about paying bills but hey i no whats right and whats not NO one should do bb an escort or not who agrees [miss caroline, 2010]

I can't imagine having unprotected sex with a client, I really really can't. Even if I stretch my imagination to it's furthest lengths I can't see myself saying 'go on, just do it'. I imagine some girls see sex work as an extension of their personal sexual experiences, which is sad really. I guess if you are willing to fuck strangers unprotected, it's not a huge leap to do it for money as well. Personally I think I'd be devastated to discover that chlamydia had been twisting up my insides, or warts were turning my vagina into a mass of road bumps while I was happily putting my faith in unfaithful men. But then that's me expressing my opinion while squicking out [EvaBeeva, 2012]

I despise clients who seek BB [bareback sex] as this behaviour kills people and puts pressure on some escorts to offer riskier services... When some slimeball [client] asks me for BB he is inviting me to sign up to a shortened life with a debilitating illness, a collage of very unpleasant drugs and an early grave. [JodieTs, 2010]

We use such forthright and poignant narratives as outlined above to heavily emphasise and underscore how the practice of unprotected sex is treated with resolute anger by established sex workers in the UK. Similar sentiments are echoed in the comments by sex workers interviewed by Siegel (2016), who disparagingly asserted that Eastern European women, particularly those from Bulgaria and Romania, had ruined the business because they charged less than the prices agreed by Western European sex workers, resulting in the undercutting of prices of the more established, local women, having sex with clients without a condom, and generally lacking 'civilized' manners, resulting in the whole sector acquiring a bad reputation.

The new girls are from Bulgaria, and many from Romania, and no, we don't have any contact with them. Actually, we don't even want to, because they have ruined the business with their low prices... A Dutch or a German woman, or any classy foreign woman, would never work for less than 50 euros. Some ladies, especially these foreigners, will work without a condom, and they have simply ruined everything, because we would never do that (Quoted in Siegel, 2016: 75).

A possible indicator of human trafficking is the disparity in prices between non-native and native women, in that foreign women advertise sexual services for cheaper prices than native women (see Hagstedt et al., 2009). Alongside lower prices, we can argue that another possible indicator could be the advertisement of unprotected sex without a condom, due to its hazardous nature to both the seller of sex and the purchaser. Indeed, some punters also attested that the sale of bareback sex by an advertised woman was alarming and a possible indicator that the woman's profile had been written by a trafficker and pimp, who control the profile and what sexual services for sale are offered:

Most Romanian profiles display BB and unprotected sex, as normal. Quite often, it is the pimp who has written the profile and the WG is unaware of the services offered. If the pimp

is also answering the mobile/replying the texts, he can quite often lie about these services, in order to entice the punter in [Cooltiger, 2016].

You will find that most of the profiles that list bareback are written by pimps. Most of the girls do not possess the minimal English grammar to construct profiles like the ones we see for the many Romanian girls [sesalovesdarlo, 2015].

Fourthly, some of the advertised women also had multiple other active profiles on various sex sites in the UK, as well on social network sites, in particular Twitter pages for online classifieds, possibly as a means of gaining more exposure. An interesting aspect however, was some of the women's various profiles demonstrated notable profile discrepancies, such as the name or alias, age listed, working location and nationality. Indeed, on the latter point, we found that many women, especially those from Romania, would describe themselves as being 'Latina' or Italian, or Argentinian or Spanish, concealing their nationality as a reverse ethnic reputation manipulation (see Bovenkirk, Siegel and Zaitch, 2003 for an account on ethnic reputation manipulation). We were able in some instances to cross-reference this particular discrepancy through inspecting the women's profiles on the 'AdultWork'¹⁰ site, in which verification of one's profile and being able to join the site is through submitting identification proof of nationality, such as a passport¹¹ or driver's license. In one of the many cases we came across, a sex worker was stated as Italian in a website (www.sexolondon.com), yet her AdultWork profile, where proof of nationality must be submitted for the profile to gain verified status, states that she is Romanian, representing a prominent discrepancy and concealment of original nationality.

Just as Di Nicola et al. (2015) identified in their study, the poor use of the language of the country in the profile text – in our case English – in regards to spelling, grammatical and punctuation errors can point to two robust indications of trafficking. Firstly, the presence of spelling mistakes, poor usage of grammar as well as punctuation errors in the profile text signifies a very limited knowledge of English by the featured woman, and/or secondly, it may indicate that the profile itself has been written by a trafficker, who may be from the same country of origin as the featured woman, and is a non-native English speaker who also possesses a limited grasp of the language. As such, we can speculate that these profiles, as well as the profiles that list multiple women and are written extremely similarly, may be composed and posted by another party, who create, write and control these suspicious profiles.

As we mentioned earlier, we found many instances where women, particularly those from Romania, would conceal their identity and instead be advertised under various nationalities including Italian, 'Latina' or Argentinian or Spanish. We found several threads that were able to shed light on some of the reasons for this, with most pointing to the negative reputation of Romanians in the UK, including: 'Working girls misrepresenting their nationality' 'Why do so many Romanian girls do bareback sex', 'Beware Romanian girls on AdultWork', 'Are all Romanians best avoided', 'Vivastreet ' New Girl In Town' Wolverhampton THE WORST SIDE OF THIS BUSINESS', "Romanians (Yep) Another Romanian Post" and 'Trafficking of women'. One poster outlined phases of the trafficking processes, specifically recruitment and exploitation as an explanation of how Romanian women were transported to the UK, and discussed their refusal to visit Romanian women for health reasons, given the propensity of Romanian sex workers to engage in unprotected sex, where the woman may be forced to offer the sale of unprotected sex by a pimp or trafficker, who possess a lack of concern for health or well-being of the victim:

A significant number of these Romanian girls are brought over here under false pretence's (PA [personal assistant], modelling... job). When they get here they have their passport

¹⁰ A very interesting observation that we made came from reading the list of the Terms of Use outlined on the AdultWork sex website, in which it stipulates that a to a large amount of nationals from certain countries of Albania, Latvia, Romania and Russia are deliberately trying to defraud the website and its membership. As a consequence, nationals from these countries are subject to higher levels of additional verification and proof of identity, before being allowed to offer services on the website. This may be a compelling reason why criminal groups may use the dark web to purchase counterfeit documentation, as means to join and acquire membership by passing the relevant security procedures on the website.

¹¹ Although it cannot be ruled out that such documentation may be in the possession of a trafficking gang, network or a pimp.

taken and are told they owe the pimp £x,000 and need to start paying back and the only job is prostitution, they are then subjected to violence to ensure their compliance. Now Sergie [name assigned to any archetypal pimp of Eastern-European origin] doesn't give a shit about the girl as he will move her on in a few weeks anyway so just like a hire car he wants to thrash the crap out of her in the time he has her. For him BB [bareback] is a way to get more clients and thus more money from the girl so he tells the girl that she is now offering BB. The girl is probably ignorant to the risks but quite frankly the risks of saying no to Sergie are significantly more life threatening and immediate than the risks of having 1000 high viral load HIV+ guys... This is why I don't see Romanian girls, I don't want to fuck a girl who is not doing the job on their own free will [rolf32313, 2014].

The influx of UK based Romanians have destroyed the previous good reputation of EE WGs (Polish/Czech/Hungarian) due to their bad attitude and rubbish service, coupled with their pimps' encouragement to rip off the punter. Yet guys still pay to see them because they are cheap. Avoid romanians, they all lie and cheat you out of your money. Trust me, they asked me for more money after 10 minutes, for you to cum again.. Also they lie about their nationality, they would say brazillian, to italian, to spanish... etc... they all are decitful. They dont look like their profile pictures either.[Taggart, 2016]

Such elucidatory passages from the virtual ethnography support the concept of “ethnic reputation manipulation”, as posited by Bovenkerk et al (2003), which we find is most pertinent and useful to refer to here. Bovenkerk et al. state that individuals and groups, as they engage in criminal activity, manipulate their ethnicity and ethnic reputation, either through emphasis or concealment. In doing so, these individuals and groups can acquire a foothold, status and power in a new country, and address an assortment of audiences that include insiders, outsiders and the law. As Bovenkerk et al. (2003) further expound about the salient nature of reputations:

Reputations are judgements about vices, virtues, strengths and weaknesses that communities accumulate, process and reprocess about their members. The circulation of reputational information seems essential to all social interaction, whether conducting a business, achieving information or identifying reliable others... Reputations go beyond more personal impressions made on others: they are built up over time, involve a great deal of indirect evidence and often include social representations of entire groups (collective reputations) (Bovenkerk et al, 2003: 27).

Moreover, reputations can frequently have indirect and distant consequences. Given that reputations often circulate in conversations within groups, as we have observed with punters on web forums, it can be most challenging to create, cultivate or elude a particular reputation. Furthermore, Bovenkerk et al (2003) assert that whilst ethnic reputations can be difficult for individuals to alter depending on the social context – in this case Romanian sex workers in the UK – they can play a positive or a negative role for them. Thus, the management of ethnic reputations often consists of playing with already extant reputations, either by masking one's ethnic ascription or embellishing stereotyped images. Our findings concerning the misrepresentation of nationality on their advertised profiles by predominantly Romanian sex workers in the UK online, most likely due to a perceived very poor reputation by punters, align with Bovenkerk et al.'s (2003) treatise, and to which we can argue is most likely a strategic mechanism to attract prospective customers, protect against the loss of visits by sex purchasers and by extension, business earnings made during these encounters.

Reverse image searches of profile photographs

A further significant aspect of our research was from a method we used to inspect the photographs of some of the woman featured in adverts we had marked to be dubious. We employed reverse image searching, a technique in which photographs can be searched for using a search engine such as google, to ascertain whether the same photograph is present on other websites and to locate, if possible, the source of a photograph. To do so, we would simply right click the photograph of the woman in question,

select the 'search Google for image' option, and then see if the woman's photograph was present elsewhere. We also used a dedicated search engine specifically designed for this use, called 'TinEye'. We found this method to be very effective in identifying that the photographs of some of the women were featured on other profiles, under various aliases, and in different locations in the UK, indicating constant, continuous movement within the UK. Moreover, this method also revealed that some of the women advertised were also featured on European sex sites, such as those based in Poland and Romania, which suggests that the photographs of the women in the listings have been stolen from other sites, or that these women have been moved to the UK for sex work.

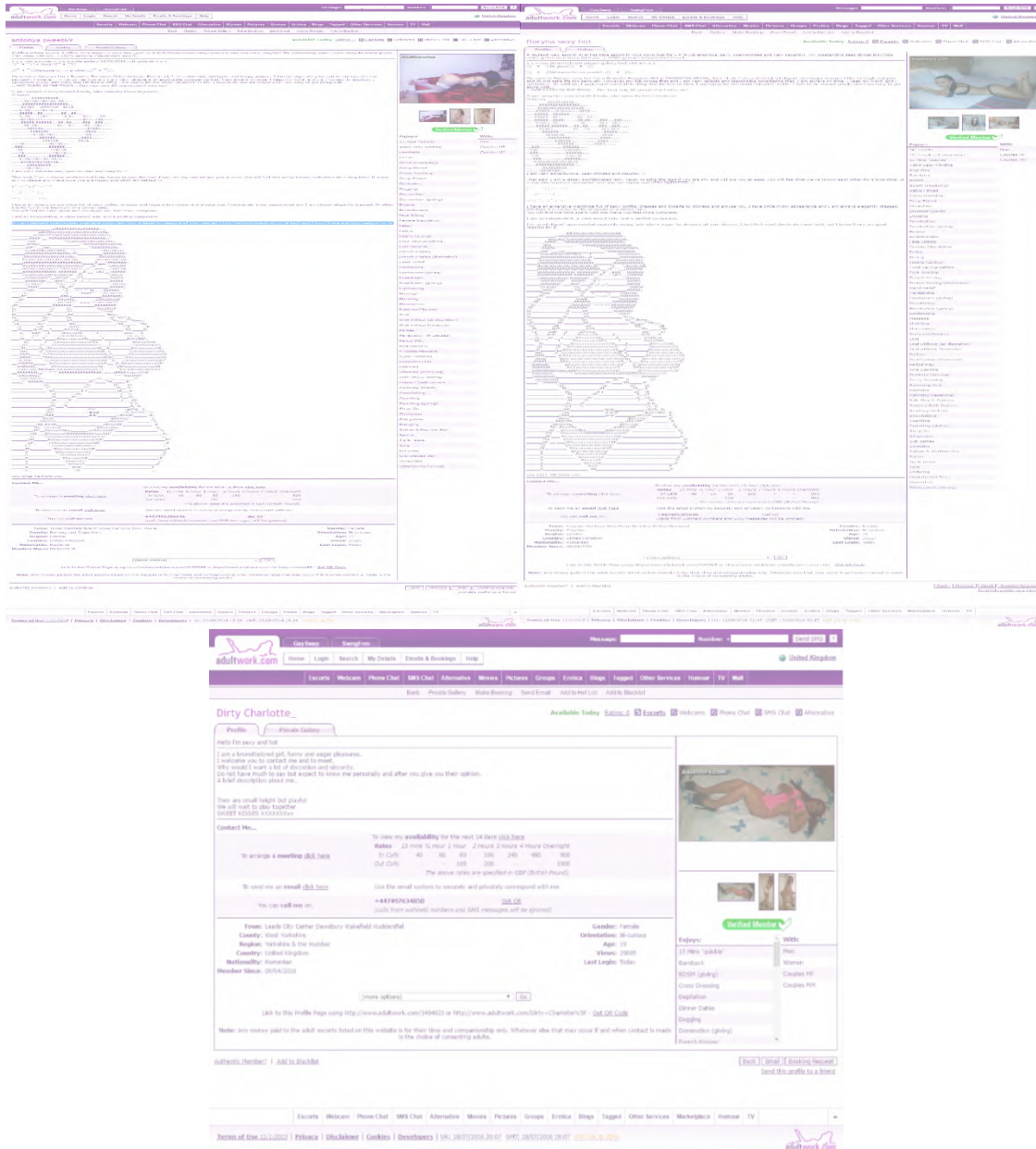
AdultWork trafficked 'identity laundering'

A further interesting finding emerged from our analysis of women who we had identified as possible trafficked victims. Assessing their profiles on AdultWork, we noted a phenomenon of where one young woman in the profile had been replaced by another, and then subsequently replaced by another woman after a few weeks. Consistent within these changes was the profile itself, as well as the descriptive text of the profile. In many of these instances, we noted that the women advertised possessed a very long, comprehensive list of sexual services, for the low, inclusive price of £80, in which unprotected 'bareback' sex was also listed. We suspect this 'profile swapping', taking place on the AdultWork website as the main platform, may be a method used by traffickers to bypass ID checks to gain profile verification, and to engage in identity laundering of victims. This would advantageously enable traffickers to capitalise on an already verified AdultWork profile, with little effort in replacing photographs, or creating new profiles and written profile descriptions for the listed woman. This tactic has not gone unnoticed by punters:

Profile selling is rife, genuine people get them verified and sell them on ! if Sergei gets a new girl he can simply use an existing profile for her [Jimmyredcab, 2015].

there is some profile swapping going on which is not, sadly, that unusual with some EE [Eastern-European] girls where Pimps control the profiles. Any good FB [feedback] can then be transferred to a completely different girl [Jacob, 2011].

Figure 12. A group of potentially trafficked young Romanian women, who have all been advertised on the AdultWork website under the same profile under the aliases of “Antonya sweet”, “Floryna sweet”, “Dirty Charlotte_”, with each woman being advertised for a few weeks, and then replaced by another, in the cities of London and Leeds. This rotation of women under the same profile indicates that profile swapping may be occurring, or that the profile has been sold to other traffickers and/or pimps to advertise the particular, featured woman.



Source: Authors' research

Concluding remarks

To recapitulate, the aim of this study has been to address an important gap in the scholarly research of the use of the internet and other digital technologies in the process of human smuggling and trafficking in the UK context. Similarly to the findings of studies regarding other contexts, our findings strongly suggest that such technologies open up a virtual world which does not merely mirror offline context in which the various phases of both human smuggling and trafficking take place. Rather the case is that the internet, social networking sites as well as the use of the various information and communication technologies amplify and expand the potential of human smugglers and traffickers to attract and identify clients as well as to lure victims into their trade.

An important implication of our findings, which is specific to the UK context, regards a possible reappraisal of the prevalence of smuggling and human trafficking. There is no doubt that the extent of public awareness and the prioritisation of these issues for both policy makers and law enforcement in the UK is significant (NCA 2016; 2017). Nevertheless, particularly as regards trafficking for sexual exploitation, the virtualisation of sex markets may have the consequence that a great deal of illicit activity, exploitation and victimisation may remain undetected. While our virtual ethnography approach has produced a series of indicators that could be used for the development of tools for the prevention, detection and suppression of criminal activity, there is clearly need for a larger scale research effort targeting specifically these online sexual markets.

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