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Lara Gemar April 12, 2021

Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: An Evaluation of the Impacts of Social Media Platforms on Trafficker Grooming Tactics in the United States

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An abstract of
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of Emory University in partial fulfillment
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Abstract

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Social media has been identified as a tool for sex traffickers to connect with victims, potential buyers, and other traffickers in the United States. Specific details of social media's implementation and impacts, specifically in the grooming of domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST) victims, remain unclear. This study aims to evaluate social media's role in the grooming process, with particular attention to what types of traffickers are using social media, how they are using social media to develop trust with the victim, how the physical and psychological grooming tactics used differ when social media is use, and how social media affects the overall duration of the grooming process. Additionally, this study aims to identify what, if any, impacts of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic have been observed with DMST. Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 10 service providers who work directly with survivors of DMST in the US. Results highlight several key themes in the grooming process and provide relevant information to the study's targeted hypotheses. Implications for future research and policy initiatives are discussed.

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Acknowledgements

I am incredibly thankful for the support of my advisor, Dr. Emily Gade. Her enthusiasm and guidance helped me overcome many challenges and ultimately allowed me to transform my passion for this issue into a successful research project. I would also like to thank my committee members, Dr. David Davis and Dr. Adriana Chira, for their thoughtful contributions.

I would also like to give a huge thank you to Dr. Danielle Jung, who provided consistent guidance and support during the early stages of this project. She was an incredibly positive and motivating presence for our honors cohort.

And, lastly, a massive thank you to my family, friends, teammates, and coaches who have supported me over the past year! This thesis wouldn't be what it is without all of you.

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I. Introduction

Human trafficking is one of the most heinous, yet hidden, crimes occuring in our world today. While many Americans envision human trafficking as a crime involving perpetrators and victims overseas, this is not reality. In 2019 alone, the National Human Trafficking Hotline, in collaboration with state and federal law enforcement, identified 22,326 victims and survivors of sex and labor trafficking within the United States (Polaris 2020). Over 5,000 of these victims were minors when they were first trafficked (Polaris 2019).

This study will focus on domestic minor sex trafficking (DMST), which is just one subset of all human trafficking occuring in the United States. DMST refers to the sex trafficking of minors (individuals under the age of 18), within the borders of the United States, for the purpose of commercial sexual exploitation (Shared Hope International).

In recent years, social media usage has become deeply ingrained in the lives of many Americans, especially youth. Although many popular apps such as Instagram and Snapchat require users to be thirteen to download, research indicates that the average American child opens their first social media account at age eleven (Brigham 2018). The features of social media apps allow for many avenues of personal connection that may not be possible in a face-to-face setting. In some cases, criminals and exploiters, including child sex traffickers, have altered their operations to use social media as a tool to their benefit.

While information is known about how traffickers connect with buyers and advertise victims over social media, research on the function of social media in the pre-exploitation phase is extremely limited. This thesis aims to evaluate the role of social media in the grooming of DMST victims in the United States. The grooming process refers to the period between initial

identification of a victim and exploitation of that victim, when the trafficker uses a variety of tactics to build a trusting relationship with the victim.

Using data gathered from semi-structured qualitative interviews, this study aims to provide insight on some broader themes within DMST, specifically the most common ways in which children are recruited into sex trafficking, the role of social media throughout the trafficking process, and which social media platforms are being used most frequently.

More narrowly, this research aims to determine (1) what types of traffickers are using social media as a tool in the grooming process, (2) how traffickers build trust with victims when social media is the setting of initial contact, (3) how the use of social media in the grooming process impacts the physical or psychological methods of control the trafficker may use for grooming, and (4) how the use of social media impacts the duration of the grooming process.

An additional goal is to understand what, if any, impacts of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic on DMST have been observed and what impacts are anticipated long-term. Ultimately, data from this study will be used to inform recommendations for future research and policy intiatives that may mitigate the crisis of child sex trafficking in the United States.

What is Human Trafficking?

The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that more than 40.3 million individuals are being trafficked globally (ILO 2017). Of these 40.3 million victims, an estimated 3.8 million adults and 1.0 million children are victims of sex trafficking. The human trafficking industry is extremely profitable, second only to drug trafficking. The ILO estimates that human trafficking generates an $150 billion USD profit annually (ILO 2014).

Human trafficking can be broken down into two main categories: labor trafficking and sex trafficking. Labor trafficking is defined as “the use of force, fraud, or coercion to induce

another individual to work or provide service" (Polaris). Sex trafficking is defined as "the use of force, fraud, or coercion to induce another individual to sell sex" (Polaris). Sex and labor trafficking can be further broken down into twenty-five distinct typologies, each with "its own business model, trafficker profiles, recruitment strategies, victim profiles, and method of control that facilitate human trafficking" (Polaris 2017). These many forms of human trafficking take place with great prevalence across the United States, in all fifty states and in rural and urban communities alike (NCMEC).

It is important to differentiate between human trafficking and human smuggling, as these crimes may appear similar but are vastly different in practice. As defined by U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), human smuggling is "the importation of people into the United States involving deliberate evasion of immigration laws" (ICE). Human smuggling is centered on "the provision of a service," such as transportation or fraudulent identification documents, for an individual who *voluntarily* seeks entry into a foreign country (ICE 2017). At its core, human smuggling is transportation-based, whereas human trafficking is exploitation-based (ICE 2017). Frequently, a crime may start as human smuggling but evolve into human trafficking, as the individual crosses the border and falls under the control of a trafficker, who may have held a amicable role in the smuggling process (ICE 2017).

Human trafficking has long been involved in political discourse in the United States. Since the passage of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000, the federal government has focused on strengthening multi-agency efforts to investigate and combat human trafficking. Since then, Congressional Republicans and Democrats alike have supported a multitude of anti-trafficking bills. Throughout the past five Congressional sessions (2011-2021), forty-two bills related to human trafficking have been signed by the president and enacted into

federal law. Some of the most influential include the Violence against Women Reauthorization Act (2013) and the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) of 2018.

What is Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking (DMST)?

DMST is a subset of all sex trafficking occuring in the United States. DMST is defined as "the commercial sexual exploitation of American children within US borders for monetary or other compensation (shelter, food, drugs, etc.)" (Shared Hope International). While sex trafficking of adults is defined by the presence of force, fraud, or coercion, these factors do *not* have to be present if the victim is a minor (Hardy et al. 2013). Minors are unable to consent and, under no circumstances, can be viewed as willing participants in their own sexual exploitation. While prostitution (voluntary sex work) is observed in adults, who are able to consent, there is no much thing as voluntary sex work or prostitution with children. Any minor engaged in a commercial sex act is a victim (Shared Hope International).

DMST is synonymous with commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), as well as with child sex slavery and child sex trafficking (Shared Hope International). While these terms are used interchangeably in existing literature, only the term DMST will be used in this study for the purpose of clarity. Although there are many commonalities between child sexual abuse (CSA) and DMST, they are *not* synonymous. The key distinction is that DMST is defined as commercial sex, whereas CSA is not for the purpose of financial gain or commercial endeavors.

The ILO estimates that while the majority of children are trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation *across* borders, about 25% are trafficked *within* the borders of their own country (Mapp 2016). It is important to note that victims do not have to be moved across any geographic borders, even within the United States, to be considered victims of DMST.

II. Literature Review

Before discussing the literature, it is important to discuss the inherent limitations of existing work in this field. Very few studies to date are grounded in theory (Twis and Shelton 2018). Most research relies upon information provided directly by survivors or from individuals and organizations that work directly with survivors. While the experiences of survivors are extremely valuable, they are unable to reflect the experiences of those victims who did not survive trafficking or the many that choose not to report to law enforcement or seek assistance after they "exit the life." Furthermore, it is difficult to gain access to these survivors, especially those that are still minors, for the purpose of data collection or interviewing.

Many survivors suffer severe physical and/or mental trauma as a result of trafficking. As a result, many survivors, who do seek assistance, undergo a strenuous recovery process and may not opt to participate in a study on their experiences while undergoing recovery, given the very real possibility of retraumatization.

The Prevalence of DMST

Several studies have researched the prevalence of DMST in the US; however, the "hidden" nature of trafficking makes it very difficult to quantify nationwide (Greene et al. 1999; Estes and Weiner 2001; Edwards et al. 2005; O'Brien et al. 2017). The first study of its kind, conducted by Greene et al. (1999), focused in New York City and found that 10% of the surveyed sheltered youth had engaged in "survival sex," which is just one type of DMST.

Later studies attempted to quantify DMST at the national level. In a survey of 13,000 American youth, Edwards et al. (2005) found that 3.5% had been sexually victimized, which is likely an underestimate given the confusing nature of victimization. Estes and Weiner (2001) estimated that 244,000-325,000 American youth were *at risk* for being victims of DMST, while

Stanksy and Finkelhor (2012) estimated that the most reasonable range for American youth who are victims of sex trafficking was 300,000-600,000.

The Victims of DMST

Children can be recruited and coerced into sex trafficking at any age. A small percentage of children are even born into situations of trafficking (International Organization for Migration). Both girls and boys can be targeted by sex traffickers. According to recent data, the average age of a minor female sex trafficking victim in the United States is 15 years old, while the average age of minor male victims is slightly younger (NCMEC; International Organization for Migration). One study identified that buyers' ideal age of female victims is 11, because the girl is unlikely to get pregnant and also unlikely to have a strong support system to detect exploitation (Tidball et al. 2015).

While all children are at risk of being trafficked, certain subgroups are considered high-risk. Traffickers tend to prey on the most vulnerable individuals, including those who have limited social support, are part of an ethnic minority, identify as LGBTQ, abuse drugs or alcohol, have a history of childhood trauma, or face housing insecurity (Burke et al. 2019; Banks and Kyckelhahn 2011; Farrell 2012; Martinez and Kelle 2013; Mapp 2016; NCMEC). Time spent in foster care or the juvenile justice system is also often linked to victimization, especially for boys (O'Brien et al. 2017). Poverty is also a consistent risk factor (Mapp 2016; Burke et al. 2019). Children who live in poverty may seek goods for themselves or their families, and see providing sex as a way for others to "buy" them (Mapp 2016).

The Profile of Traffickers

Sex traffickers have a variety of different profiles. They can be both male and female. While it is a common misconception that traffickers target strangers, most victims are trafficked

by romantic partners, friends, or even their own family members (Polaris). It is estimated that over 40% of minor victims were initially recruited into sex trafficking by a family member (International Organization for Migration).

DMST can be broken down into four subcategories, based on the type of trafficker. These categories are pimp-controlled trafficking, gang-controlled trafficking, family-controlled trafficking, and survival sex trafficking (Mapp 2016).

Pimp-controlled trafficking involves a trafficker who is unrelated to the victim being trafficked. The relationship often begins as either a romantic relationship or a friendship (Mapp 2016; Reid 2012; Twis et al. 2020). The organizational structure of pimp-controlled trafficking varies significantly and can exist within the context of the family system, organized crime, and personal relationships (Twis et al. 2020). While many pimps may operate within a trafficking organization or with others, some operate alone.

Gang-controlled trafficking exists within a very different organizational structure than other subcategories of trafficking. Gangs are "centrally organized units," with "well-established power structures" that, in some cases, may be a part of a broader transnational network (Carpenter and Gates 2016; Twis et al. 2020). Within this organizational structure, there is significant variation between different gangs in the importance and facilitators of sex trafficking. In some cases trafficking is conducted by individuals for personal profit, with no direct linkage to their gang, while in others the majority of the gang may be involved in trafficking and the profits will be funnelled to gang leaders (Carpenter and Gates 2016). The victims may live in neighborhoods where gang activity is frequent, have family or friends who are involved with the gang, or view involvement with the gang as acceptable and/or beneficial (Mapp 2016; Shared Hope International).

Family-controlled trafficking entails a dynamic in which a member of the family, most commonly the mother, sells one or multiple children within the family for profit or to feed a drug addiction (Mapp 2016; Sprang and Cole 2018). While this can happen in both rural and urban areas, it is more commonly observed in rural areas where surveillance of illicit activity may be lower (Sprang and Cole 2018). Children victimized in a family-controlled trafficking situation often experience other forms of trauma, including sexual assault, physical assault, witnessing violence of another, or a health-related crisis such as pregnancy (Sprang and Cole 2018). Familial sex trafficking is also extremely psychologically damaging, given that the exploitation by an adult family member or parent "violates a most sacred trust" and shatters any reasonable expectation of care (Sprang and Cole 2018).

Survival sex refers to the action of a child offering himself or herself for sexual exploitation in return for money or goods. Survival sex does not involve a third-party trafficker, but is still considered DMST because children are unable to consent to their own sexual exploitation. Survival sex is very rare, most often seen with boys, and seldom documented in data (Mapp 2016).

The Profile of Buyers

The buyers of sex, frequently referred to as "johns," can fit a variety of profiles. Many johns are professionals or prominent figures in the community. They can be male or female, friends, strangers, or relatives (Shared Hope International). Many buyers hide their identities behind paywalls and temporary accounts, thus it is very difficult to identify and prosecute them for their actions. The low risk, high reward reality of DMST has created an extremely lucrative market in the United States (Thorn).

The Grooming of DMST Victims

Trafficking can be understood as a process with multiple phases. The first phase is victim identification, where the trafficker identifies a potential girl or boy to target. The second phase is grooming, where the trafficker seeks to build a relationship with the victim and gain his or her trust. The third phase, after the victim has been groomed, is exploitation. During this phase, the victim will be controlled by the trafficker and forced to "turn tricks" for profit. Some victims are exploited for years at the hands of their trafficker, while others are able to escape within days or weeks. The final stage is exit from "the life" and recovery; however, many victims never reach this stage.

The grooming process varies in duration and can involve many different elements of psychological and physical coercion, implemented by the trafficker, to manipulate the victim into exploitation. These tactics are often used to build trust between the victim and trafficker, which is a fundamental component of grooming. These tactics may appear harmless or normal, but in reality are extremely calculated and manipulative.

Pimp traffickers may use a combination of intimidation, affection, false hope, and shame to "cultivate loyalty" with a potential victim (Burke et al. 2019; Reid 2014). Pimps may also present the victim with elaborate gifts, money, or even basic items such as food and shelter (Reid 2014). They may also offer false promises of employment, such as a modeling gig or nannying job, to lure in vulnerable girls looking for money (Middleton 2020; Burke et al. 2019).

Gang-affiliated traffickers may rely on a variety of threatening methods of coercion in the grooming process, most notably economic coercion (taking the victim's earnings), psychological coercion, and forced drug use (Carpenter and Gates 2016; Twis et al. 2020). Victims of

gang-affiliated traffickers may be led to believe that sex will allow them to achieve status or hierarchy in the gang; however, this is not the case (Shared Hope International).

Familial traffickers may initiate grooming by slowly integrating sexual conversation or pornographic material into the relationship (Middleton 2020; Sprang and Cole 2018). Familial traffickers may also use physical force, drugs, threats of violence, parental authority, or weapons to "coerce" youth into trafficking (Sprang and Cole 2018).

Across all subtypes of trafficking, traffickers will attempt to isolate the victim from his or her social network (Finkelhor et al. 2009; Reid 2014). In some cases, with victims who are particularly active in posting online, their social media accounts may provide a clear display of their "social safety net," as well as their vulnerabilities and ongoing issues in their personal life. Some traffickers may use a victim's social network to identify and recruit friends of friends, friends of family, or friends of other victims (Burke et al. 2019).

Technology's Role in DMST

To date, only a small number of studies have looked specifically at the role of technology in facilitating DMST (Mitchell and Jones 2013; Bouché 2015; O'Brien and Li 2020; Tidball et al. 2015; Polaris 2018; Thorn 2018). Polaris (2018), Thorn (2018), and Bouché (2015) gathered data directly from survivors, while Tidball et al. (2015) and O'Brien and Li (2020) interviewed service providers who worked directly with child trafficking victims and Mitchell and Jones (2013) used law enforcement data. Within these studies, detailed information about the grooming process is limited.

Studies document that the Internet is used to link traffickers within broader criminal networks, advertise to buyers, "shield" buyers from the social stigma of buying sex, form initial

victim-trafficker connections, and "lure" victims into trafficking (Mitchell and Jones 2013; Tidball et al. 2015).

Study findings show that the percentage of traffickers meeting victims online has risen over time. Mitchell and Jones (2013) document that 17% of victims met their traffickers online, while Thorn (2018) report that 55% of the DMST victims trafficked in 2015 met their trafficker for the first time online. In situations where the trafficker does meet the victim online, about half of the victims reported that the relationship continued to develop online (Bouché 2015). Specific online platforms mentioned for grooming of child victims include Facebook, Snapchat, Tinder, Kik, Instagram, Whisper, Craigslist, chat rooms, dating sites, and gaming sites (Tidball et al. 2015; O'Brien and Li 2020; Polaris 2018).

In regard to grooming on social media, O'Brien and Li (2020) note that the dangers of these apps are two-fold. The ways in which children engage in risky behavior on these apps, such as sharing sexualized photographs, personal information, or location tags, is socially-reinforced and can be extremely dangerous. They draw upon previous research by Ybarra et al. (2006) to explain how the anonymity and far-reaching social networks on social media apps elicit this type of risky behavior from youth and allow criminals to befriend them in seemingly harmless ways. Online grooming behavior is "likely low risk," given that youth are often accustomed to harassment or unwanted attention from strangers online, and not likely to be alarmed by it.

While these studies shed light on the role of social media in DMST, they lack detail about the nuances and mechanisms of grooming. Furthermore, with the exception of O'Brien and Li (2020), they rely on data that is several years outdated.

III. Theory and Hypotheses

As discussed in the literature review, few studies have focused specifically on the role of various technologies in the grooming of DMST victims. Given the significant role of technology, especially social media, in the lives of American children, further research is necessary. This study is designed to build upon existing research to address the gaps in literature and focus specifically on the usage and impacts of social media in the grooming of DMST victims.

For traffickers, social media provides a catalog of potential victims, unprecedented access to information about these victims, easy channels of communication, and a shield of anonymity (Bouché 2015; Ybarra et al. 2006; O'Brien and Li 2020). For vulnerable children, social media apps may encourage the sharing of sexualized content, allow them to become conditioned to conversing and building relationships with strangers, and isolate them from their broader social support systems (Sanderson and Weathers 2020, Anderson & Jiang 2018). For these reasons, I theorize that the grooming process will fundamentally differ when social media is used as a tool in the grooming process.

Given the information available in the literature about the three subcategories of third-party traffickers (pimp, gang-affiliated, and familial), I theorize that the usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process differs by type of trafficker.

Due to the gangs' heavy street presence and ties to a specific location or neighborhood, I hypothesize that gang-affiliated grooming activity continues to be centered on in-person contact. With familial trafficking, I hypothesize that grooming continues to be centered on in-person contact since these relationships are generally initiated and formed within the household.

Pimps often approach their victims as a "boyfriend" or "friend," and do not necessarily rely on physical settings (neighborhood, household) to access their victims. Thus, I hypothesize

that pimps will take advantage of the "easy access" to victims that social media provides and primarily initiate contact with their victims over social media.

Hypothesis 1A: Pimp traffickers are more likely to initiate contact with a victim using social media than in an in-person setting.

Hypothesis 1B: Gang-affiliated traffickers are less likely to initiate contact with a victim using social media than in an in-person setting.

Hypothesis 1C: Familial traffickers are less likely to initiate contact with a victim using social media than in an in-person setting.

In regard to trust development between the victim and trafficker, I theorize that the "private" nature of social media will prompt children to let their guard down and more easily form a relationship with the trafficker, even if that trafficker is a complete stranger. Furthermore, I theorize that the private messaging features of social media apps will make children more inclined to engage in risky or sexual conversation, which can help build trust. Lastly, given that victim-trafficker contact over social media can happen discreetly, any adult figures may not be able to detect or prevent the relationship from developing rapidly. For these reasons, I hypothesize that social media makes it easier for traffickers to build trust with the victims.

Hypothesis 2: The usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process makes trust development between the victim and trafficker easier than in an in-person setting.

Previous research has noted that social media provides traffickers with (1) unprecedented "easy access" to a myriad of potential victims and (2) opportunities to engage with these victims in a low-risk environment (O'Brien and Li 2020; Thorn 2018). As discussed with relation to trust development above, children are more likely to "let their guard down" and divulge personal information over social media than they would face-to-face.

Given the overall ease of social media, I theorize that traffickers will be less inclined to employ both physical and psychological methods of control when the grooming takes place over a social media platform. Physical methods of control are inherently riskier, and given the low-risk environment of social media, the trafficker would not be inclined to use them. Psychological methods, while typically low-risk, may not be as necessary given that kids tend to "let their guard down" online.

Hypothesis 3A: The usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process makes traffickers less likely to rely on physical methods of control than they would if social media was not used.

Hypothesis 3B: The usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process makes traffickers less likely to rely on psychological methods of control than they would if social media was not used.

The "ease" of social media, as discussed above, may also impact the duration of the grooming process. I hypothesize that when social media is involved, communication flows easily and remains unmonitored. Thus, the duration of the grooming process as a whole will be shorter than when it takes place entirely face-to-face.

Hypothesis 4: The usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process shortens the duration of the process.

Likely Confounders

There are many possible explanations for variation in the grooming process, social media usage being only one of them. Traffickers use many other tools, such as drugs, alcohol, physical violence, and emotional manipulation, as a means of grooming. Any of these factors could significantly impact the trust development process, timeline of the grooming process, and the

other physical or psychological tactics necessary for the trafficker to gain control of the victim. The characteristics of the victim, such as his or her age, sex, location, home life, or history of abuse, could also dictate the grooming tactics employed by the trafficker and the timeline of the grooming process. Likewise, the characteristics of the trafficker, such as his or her status in the community, organizational affiliation or lack thereof, wealth, and prior relationship to the victim or lack thereof, could dictate the grooming tactics employed and the timeline of the grooming process.

IV. Data and Methods

Study Sample

Access to survivors of DMST is limited and the potential of retraumatization is significant. For these reasons, this study focused on gathering information from professionals who work directly with DMST victims. In order to be eligible for this study, participants had to meet the following criteria: (1) be adults, (2) have done professional or volunteer work related to human trafficking for at least 1 year, (3) worked with at least 3 minor victims, and (4) be based at an organization within the US.

Potential study participants were sourced from the Internet, previous related studies, and by way of recommendation from experts. In the Internet search, organizations that partner with state human trafficking task forces were identified. These organizations were then evaluated in more detail to identify ones that worked with minor victims. Individuals at these organizations who appeared to work directly with minor victims, based on the online staff descriptions, were identified.

Initially, individuals from 23 organizations based in 14 different states were contacted, in order to diversify the application pool as much as possible. Potential participants received an

initial recruitment email inviting them to participate in a 45-60 minute interview. Included in this initial email was information on study objectives and participation guidelines. The study's focus on social media's impacts on the grooming process was *not* disclosed in this initial email, so not to lead the participant to consider the role of social media more than they would naturally when discussing DMST.

Interview Guide and Data Collection

Questions in the semi-structured interview guide were informed by the literature. Included were three sets of questions, as well as an initial short series of background questions about the individual and their work. The first set of questions asked for general perceptions about the grooming process, the second set of questions focused on the role of social media in the grooming process, and the third set asked about the impacts of the pandemic. Follow-up questions were asked when appropriate. The interview guide is available in Appendix A.

While the majority of questions in the interview guide were directly linked to this study's hypotheses, three overview questions were also included. These were intended to (1) initiate a natural conversation with the participant and (2) gain insight into what the participant thinks is most important about DMST, before being prompted with more focused questions.

Data was collected through virtual interviews, conducted by telephone or on Google Teams. Participants did not receive any incentives or payment for study participation.

All participants were orally consented. The consent form is included in Appendix B. All participants were asked to provide oral consent for (1) the interview and (2) the audio-recording. One participant did not consent to the audio-recording. Hand-written notes were taken during this interview. All other interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed after the fact.

Protection of Human Subjects

The study protocol was reviewed and determined exempt by the Emory University Institutional Review Board. In order to ensure participant privacy, all participants' identities, specific locations, and affiliations will remain anonymous. In the interviews, no questions were asked that required identifying information about a specific individual, case, or location. Interview transcripts were labeled with a number, rather than the participant's name or organization. Audio recordings and interview transcripts were securely stored.

Participants were informed that they could decline to answer any questions they did not wish to answer. They were also informed that even if they decided to take part in the interview, they could change their mind at any time and withdraw from the study without penalty.

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed from the audio-recording within 48 hours of occurrence. Non-verbatim transcripts were created, in order to produce a record of the interview that contains all the essential meaning behind spoken statements, while omitting any unnecessary speech or background noise. The transcripts were reviewed multiple times. Emerging themes and representative quotes were identified. This information was then organized by hypothesis for aggregate analysis of results.

V. Results

Information about Study Participants

Ten service providers agreed to participate in an interview. All participants were female. Two of these ten individuals worked at the same organization and participated in the interview together. The other eight interviews took place individually.

On average, participants had 10.5 years of experience and had worked with approximately 60 minor victims in total. The two participants who did not provide an estimate for the number of trafficking victims worked with victims in a medical capacity. They stated that victims often do not disclose full details to them and, with this limited information, it can be difficult to differentiate between victims of trafficking, sexual abuse, and sexual assault.

One of the study participants reported that she was a survivor of child sex trafficking. Three other participants cited personal history with sexual assault, sexual abuse, and/or childhood trauma. Two others reported that while they had no personal history of trafficking or sexual abuse, a close relative did. The remaining four participants reported no personal linkages to trafficking or other forms of sexual trauma.

Demographic information on participants is included in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Demographics of Participants

Participant ID	**Location**	**Years of work experience with DMST victims**	**Total # of DMST victims worked with**	**Personal history of sex trafficking**
1	Georgia	25	“Too many to count”	No
2	Texas	1.5	40-50	No
3	Tennessee	5	175	No
4	Georgia	5	20	No
5	Texas	5	12-15	Yes
6	Georgia	20	75	No
7	Georgia	.	.	No
8	Georgia	8	.	No
9	Ohio	2	40	No
10	Minnesota	10	40	No

Overview Questions

Overview Question 1: What is the most common way in which children are recruited into sex trafficking?

Two central themes emerged.

Theme 1: People they know. Participants cited that the most common way kids are recruited into trafficking is through friends (N=3), peers at school (N=1), or family members (N=2). One respondent cited that the familial route is particularly prevalent in rural settings. Another respondent detailed that a trafficker may instruct teenage boys or girls, who are under the trafficker's control, to "befriend" a victim to lure them into trafficking. These teens are often referred to as "bottoms" and can be considered victims themselves.

Theme 2: Online. Participants also named online platforms as means of recruitment, specifically social media (N=4) and the Dark Web (N=1). The only specific app mentioned in this initial line of questioning was Instagram, but specific features of the app's functionality were not discussed.

Overview Question 2: What is your perception of the role of social media in the grooming of DMST victims?

All participants indicated that social media had some function or influence on the grooming process, but these ranged widely. Some respondents indicated that social media has made trafficking worse, describing it as "a free for all" and "the biggest platform that traffickers are using." On the other hand, some were more hesitant to blame social media for the prevalence of trafficking. One participant described social media as a "tool," but "just one of the tools in [the trafficker's] toolbox." Another participant stated that "you could erase social media tomorrow and would have the same rates of trafficking, because the trafficker would just adapt the ways they are intercepting children." Table 2 details these responses.

Table 2: Perceptions on the Role of Social Media in Grooming

Theme	Frequency	Representative Quotes
Traffickers use social media as a platform for grooming.	N=2	"The vehicle for grooming" "The biggest platform that traffickers are using"
Traffickers use social media to gain information about potential victims	N=2	"It is so dangerous because we have people who don't really know each other keeping tabs on each other." "You know where they are, you know when they're home alone, you know when their parents are out and not home. You have real-time information on what kids are doing, what they are feeling, what their vulnerabilities are..."
Traffickers use social media to initiate contact with victims.	N=7	"Now everyone is so reliant on cell phones, this allows the grooming process to begin in the [victim's] home over an app or text messages" "The grooming process involves reaching out to that child and, with social media, I feel confident in saying that it is the biggest way that traffickers are connecting or recruiting young kids and adults alike." "A first connection" "An avenue for instant access to a field of potential victims" "In today's day and time, everybody has a phone in their hand and the access is just so immediate." "Social media has made the playing field bigger and more accessible, but it has not fueled a new industry, rather it has enabled traffickers to act with more ease" "Initial contact can be a combination of things. In some cases [the trafficker] will message them right away and say "oh I noticed you are so beautiful," in other cases will like and comment for a while on their posts to get the young person's attention."
Traffickers build a relationship with the	N=3	"So they'll first reach out to them on some sort of social media platform, typically those conversations

victim over social media.		are encouraging that young person to "link up" or share contact information, they might tell them how beautiful they are, tell them they could be a model, ask if they have other beautiful friends, if they want to come to parties or meet with a photographer." "A way to build emotional intimacy" "I have seen cases where the relationship stays online for a while because the victim was apprehensive at first and took a while to build trust, but another case with a 15 year old who is very outgoing and seeking male attention and she was willing to meet up with individuals she meets online right away."
The anonymity of social media apps allow traffickers to hide their true identity.	N=4	"Traffickers can easily change usernames, pictures, etc. on social media. It is very hard to track down their real identity." "Deceive the victim in many ways by appearing as a school-aged person" "There are apps like Snapchat where your messages are deleted or some that have secret chats so parents aren't able to look at those." "[The anonymity] has worked to their advantage because they can sell an image better, in person they may not be able to hold up this front."

Overview Question 3: What specific social media apps have you seen traffickers using in the grooming process? What features of these apps are most attractive to traffickers?

Seven participants provided information on specific social media sites. Those mentioned were TikTok (N=3), Instagram (N=5), Facebook (N=2), Snapchat (N=5), Kik (N=1), WhatsApp (N=1), and unspecific gaming apps (N=1). In regard to the specific features of these apps, participants mentioned "Snapmaps," the location geotagging feature of Snapchat (N=1), Snapchat's temporary messages and photos (N=2), private messaging features (N=2), and sexual video challenges on TikTok (N=1).

Targeted Questions

For Hypothesis 1A: Can you describe the grooming process when the trafficker is a pimp? Do you see that pimp traffickers use social media in the grooming process?

Six participants provided responses. All indicated that pimp traffickers use social media readily throughout the grooming process, including to initially identify victims, get access to these victims, and form romantic relationships with the victims.

> *Pimp traffickers have "a history of all contact with the potential victim, so they don't have to remember what they were messaging about."*
>
> *"It is much easier for pimps to learn about victims and their vulnerabilities and elicit information over social media."*

For Hypothesis 1B: Can you describe the grooming process when the trafficker is gang-affiliated? Do you see that gang-affiliated traffickers use social media in the grooming process?

Six participants provided responses to these questions. No participants indicated that they were confident in gang-affiliated traffickers' use of social media in the grooming process; however, four indicated that it was possible but they did not know the specifics. Two respondents noted that they often "pull people in" through the surrounding community and families already affiliated with the gang.

> *"They could use it as they would to try to recruit new members for the gang."*
>
> *"Social media may be a component, but it depends on the nature of the gang's activity in the community."*
>
> *[Gang trafficking] is "a cultural thing."*
>
> *"They rely more on street cred."*

For Hypothesis 1C: Can you describe the grooming process when the trafficker is a relative of the victim? Do you see that familial traffickers use social media in the grooming process?

Five participants provided information about familial trafficking. One respondent indicated that this was possible, but did not provide any specifics. The remaining four respondents stated that grooming with familial trafficking happens face-to-face.

"Grooming internally within the home"

Based on "in-person physical control"

"The trafficker doesn't need social media to get that person."

For Hypothesis 2: What tactics do traffickers use to build trust with a victim? How do traffickers build trust with their victims over social media?

Table 3 provides detail on the four main themes that emerged from an overall discussion of trust development. This conversation was not specific to the type of trafficker, rather more general across all forms of trafficking. Some themes below are linked to unstable homelife or homeless/runaway situations. In instances where the child is away from home, the trafficker would likely not be familial. One respondent noted that with familial trafficking, the dynamic is based less on trust and more in expectation, i.e. "you are my family, we are doing this for us."

Table 3: Trust-Building Tactics

Theme	**Frequency**	**Representative Quotes**
Meeting basic needs	N=3	"If they flee their home environment and need housing and basic needs, a trafficker can appear to be the glue in this situation" "With the LGBTQ population, these kids may have left home if they could not stay in an environment where their family did not accept their secual orientation, a trafficker could pick them up off the streets and provide for the kid with food and shelter." "Level 1 is to meet their basic needs"
Gifting (wants and desires)	N=3	"Shower them with gifts to make them feel special" "Will meet them, take them out to get their nails done or, for a boy, could take them to get a haircut"

		"Level 2 is to give them wants and desires"
Acceptance	N=3	"Kids are vulnerable, emotionally immature, struggling to be accepted or loved or cared for, and lack discretion. They can easily fall into trafficker's traps." **"**Often victims are lacking a stable foundation for healthy relationships, normal love, and acceptance." "Trust comes fairly early and easily, traffickers show the child that they love them and are there for them."
Compliments	N=2	"Compliment how they look or their personality, makes them feel that the trafficker can be trusted" "The trafficker will side with them: Oh you want to drink? Okay, that's fine, I can tell you're super mature."

When asked about trust development over social media, only four participants provided information. Their responses tapped into the themes of acceptance and compliments discussed in Table 3.

> *"Social media can facilitate the bond between the trafficker and the victim"*
>
> *Traffickers can be "a listening ear."*
>
> *"Traffickers develop a presence on the victims page" by leaving comments and liking their pictures. They may send an initial message as well. This can look and feel like normal dating tactics.*
>
> *On online gaming sites, "where kids think they are playing other kids, the trafficker will gain their trust after a few weeks of gaming and then try to plan an in-person meet up. Once the kid finds out that it is an adult, the trust is already built."*

For Hypotheses 3A-B: What methods do traffickers use to maintain control over the victim? What methods of control are involved when traffickers initiate contact and/or groom the victim over social media?

Psychological methods of control refer to the verbal or emotional techniques used by a trafficker to manipulate the victim's feelings and thoughts. These are not tangible objects or observable actions. These methods of control can appear both positive and negative in nature.

The main commonality across all psychological methods of control is that they directly target the victim's vulnerabilities.

Many psychological tactics paint the trafficker as a friend and supporter in the eyes of the victim. The trafficker may appear as a support system for the victim (N=2) or provide them with acceptance and love (N=2). Especially for kids who have experienced prior trauma, this behavior can feel normal and lead to quick attachment.

> *"They really take advantage of all the things that can't happen or won't happen in [the kid's] natural support system."*
>
> *"This may feel like love and care for the first time in their life."*
>
> *"[Traffickers can] convince the victim that the trafficker is looking out for their best interest."*

Traffickers may also coerce the victim into a survival or guilt mentality (N=2), using language that makes the victims think they are complicit in their own exploitation. In some instances, traffickers threaten physical violence to the victim or to the victim's loved ones (N=2).

> *"Well I'm here for you and I'm not leaving you, but we need to find a way to pay rent."*
>
> *"An us against the world mentality, where the victim sees themselves as a team with their own exploiter and that they are just trying to survive."*
>
> *"You are in my family, we are doing this for us."*
>
> *"If I don't do this myself, then my sister will be the one being raped daily."*

Physical methods of control include any tangible items or actions on part of the trafficker that can be observed. This does not include emotional or verbal methods of control, which are considered psychological. Physical methods of control can be both positive and negative in nature. Eight participants provided relevant information.

Drugs (N=7) and alcohol (N=6) were the most common methods mentioned. Responses indicate that victims may willingly use these substances, be pressured into using them, or be

drugged without their knowledge. Specific substances mentioned include marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine, ecstasy, and heroin. Hennessy was also mentioned.

> *"This could be a situation where the trafficker invites the victim to a party and says, let's smoke some weed and have fun."*
>
> *"Sometimes kids do not know what [drugs] they are taking"*
>
> *"Victims may willingly take drugs to numb the pain."*

Four participants mention physical violence; however, responses indicate that physical violence is not common in the grooming stage and often not in the trafficker's best interest.

> *"It makes it harder to convince the kid that the trafficker is on their team."*
>
> *"The most prolific abusers are the ones that fly under the radar, they will never use hands or do it in a way that is very strategic."*

Five participants mention gifting. These gifts can include basic items, luxury items, or services (such as a haircut or nails). One respondent noted that the primary purpose of these methods is so that the victims can entice and recruit their peers into trafficking.

> *"Give them luxury items that are not really luxury… this is more like an article or clothing or a warm coat, not a diamond ring."*
>
> *"They will take the time to shower them with gifts and tell them how beautiful they are, all the things a girl wants."*

Five participants provided information about the psychological and physical methods of control used when the victim-trafficker relationship is initiated over social media. All indicated that traffickers use similar psychological tactics when conversing over social media that they would in-person (N=5).

> *"It is definitely more psychological [than physical] on the apps."*
>
> *"If you're in-person, you have to spend time and money taking them out and buying them little gifts, but online it's pure compliments and persuasion."*

Two respondents provided relevant information about physical methods of control when social media is involved. Both discussed that traffickers may ask the victim to send nudes and share explicit videos over social media. One noted that this can be used as "blackmail material," while the other saw these tactics as more relationship-building and not threatening in nature.

For Hypothesis 4: What is your estimate of the duration of the grooming process? Are there factors that could significantly shorten or lengthen this timeframe?

Only four participants provided estimates of the overall duration of the grooming process, which ranged from "very quickly, can be hours in some cases" to "not long" to "a few weeks" to "within six months."

Nine study participants provided information about certain factors that may impact the duration of the grooming process. Themes from this discussion are shown below in Table 4.

Table 4: Determinants of the Duration of the Grooming Process

Theme	Frequency	Quotes
Characteristics of the Trafficker	N=2	"How frequent the trafficker's access to the kid is" "Resources of the trafficker"
Victim's Needs	N=6	"The characteristics of the kid" "It happens so quickly with runaways. They're tired and emotionally drained, at the park or bus stop trying to figure out their next steps, when somebody sees that vulnerable young person and offers them a place to sleep. This can happen in the period of 30 minutes to an hour." "If they are homeless that can dramatically shorten the time frame because they don't have a place to stay." "With kids who have nowhere to run to, like a foster kid or if the parents are in jail, they are more susceptible." "[Traffickers] will not typically target the run of the mill kids, but if they do, the grooming process would be longer because the kid is not as vulnerable or emotionally needy."

		"You have some girls that are more outgoing in personality and more trusting of strangers, much more willing to do things, then you have some girls that are much more insecure and shy so it will take some time for them to warm up to meeting somebody in person after talking to them online."
Prior Trauma	N=3	"If there is previous sexual trauma in childhood before grooming, this initial trauma is essentially when the grooming starts." "Foster kids are at high risk because they have initial trauma, in order to be removed from the home there has to be some sort of trauma and then you don't know how the foster parents treat them." "If they have gone through a traumatic event already."
Social Media	N=2	"[Grooming on social media] is faster than in-person, very exciting for children, the connection is not real but it connects with the kid's emotions. Many kids who have talked to someone online for a month or two, but have never met them in-person, refer to them as their boyfriend." "Will see a longer process of grooming on social media, the trafficker has to get the girl willing to meet up in-person. If you met someone at the mall, you have already had that initial face-to-face meeting, but on social media, especially for those more shy and insecure girls, it will take them a little while longer to work up the nerve to meet someone in person."
Victim's Age	N=2	"Exploiters know that anyone under the age of 18 will carry a much steeper penalty, so they may begin the grooming process young but are very selective when they send out their minors." "With familial trafficking, the timeline is much longer, the shift in this relationship typically happens at the age of puberty."

The Coronavirus Pandemic

Interviews concluded with a discussion of the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic's impact(s): How has the pandemic impacted DMST? How has the pandemic impacted the grooming process and/or the role of social media in this process?

Six participants provided information about the impacts on the demand for sexual services from children. All indicated that the pandemic had led to an increase in demand. Reasons for this increase include needing an outlet for stress (N=3) and overall disregard for health implications (N=2).

> *"When things have been stripped away from them, it can make people do some crazy things."*
>
> *"A lot of johns are people who are in high-level positions and stressful jobs, these are people with power and money, as stress increases your vices increase, they look at these youth as a vice, as a means to meeting their sexual pleasures."*

Three respondents provided information about the impacts on traffickers. One noted that "some financial leniency during the pandemic" actually benefited traffickers, while another proposed that as people have lost income they may have turned to illicit methods to get income, such as trafficking. The third respondent claimed that, regardless of any outside circumstances, "an increase of supply will meet the demand."

Six respondents provided information about the impacts on service providers. All emphasized that their ability to work with victims had been negatively impacted by the pandemic. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, some organizations paused in-person services, limited outreach on the streets, and halted intake out of precaution for the virus (N=6). Secondly, some organizations faced diminishing budgets and were forced to make judgement calls on who to treat and limit expansion of programs (N=2).

All ten participants indicated that the impacts on victims were significant, negative, and harmful. Many noted that the full extent of these impacts is yet to be seen. Impacts on victims are presented below, in Table 5.

Table 5: Impacts of the Coronavirus Pandemic on DMST Victims

Theme	Frequency	Quotes

Physical Danger	N=2	"If one of their parents or relatives is trafficking them, the kid is isolated with their trafficker" "So many pregnant youth have been locked in with their trafficker, whatever freedom they had before they do not have anymore."
Increase in Vulnerabilities	N=5	"Anticipate a big increase in vulnerabilities due to the pandemic, both for parents (losing jobs, losing housing, doing drugs to manage stress) and for kids (mental health issues, emotional neediness). These increased vulnerabilities will be the increased pipeline for traffickers." "Kids not able to meet emotional needs and see friends, may be very lonely and wanting an outlet" "Not being in-person at school has left an emotional void for many kids." "Everyone is so secluded now and spending more time online, not only are people secluded but some people are being kept away from their family and friends, this is making them more lonely and depressed and seeking a connection with someone." "That sense of belonging is exponentially higher because there is not a lot of face-to-face interaction."
Lack of Monitoring	N=4	"The avenues and the resources that have historically been used to identify at-risk kids or kids being trafficked are now all not happening." "These things are going unseen, unheard, and unchecked." "Counselors, school teachers, coaches, and all mandated reporters do not have contact with many kids because school has been online." "There is so much people can miss without seeing a kid's body language."

In regard to the link between the pandemic and social media usage, participants acknowledged that kids have spent more time on the Internet and social media over the past year (N=5). One participant claimed that "more kids online" has already led to "more kids being targeted that way." The other four noted that while they anticipate a link between increased presence of kids online and increased victimization in this setting, the effects of this are still to come.

Summary of Findings for Main Hypotheses

Table 6, below, presents a summary of the findings for the study's central hypotheses.

Table 6: Summary of Findings

H1A: Pimp traffickers are more likely to initiate contact with a victim using social media than in an in-person setting.	Support for hypothesis.
H1B: Gang-affiliated traffickers are less likely to initiate contact with a victim using social media than in an in-person setting.	Support for hypothesis.
H1C: Familial traffickers are less likely to initiate contact with a victim using social media than in an in-person setting.	Support for hypothesis.
H2: The usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process makes trust development between the victim and trafficker easier than in an in-person setting.	Inconclusive.
H3A: The usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process makes traffickers less likely to rely on physical methods of control than they would if social media was not used.	Support for hypothesis.
H3B: The usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process makes traffickers less likely to rely on psychological methods of control than they would if social media was not used.	Inconclusive.
H4: The usage of social media as a tool in the grooming process shortens the duration of the process.	Inconclusive.

VI. Discussion

This study presents qualitative findings about service provider's perceptions of the role and usage of social media in the grooming process in DMST. Additionally presented are perceptions of the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic on DMST.

Participants provided insight on some broader themes within DMST, specifically the most common ways in which children are recruited into sex trafficking, the role of social media throughout the trafficking process, and which social media platforms are being used most frequently. Consistent with existing literature, children are most commonly recruited into sex trafficking by people they know and/or online (Polaris 2018; Thorn 2018; O'Brien and Li 2020; Mitchell and Jones 2013; International Organization of Migration). Additionally, traffickers use social media as a platform for grooming, to gain information about, initiate contact, and build relationships with victims. Participants echoed prior research that traffickers use Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Kik, and gaming apps (Thorn 2018; O'Brien and Li 2020).

New themes highlighted in this study area (1) the anonymity of social media apps that hide a trafficker's true identity and (2) the use of a newer social media app, TikTok.

Interpretation of Findings for Main Hypotheses

Findings provided support for four of the seven hypotheses (H1A, H1B, H1C, H3A). Findings for the remaining three hypotheses are inconclusive (H2, H3B, H4).

Findings indicated that, consistent with Hypotheses 1A-C, usage of social media in the grooming process differs among the three types of third-party traffickers. Pimp traffickers use social media frequently as a tool for grooming, whereas gang-affiliated traffickers and familial traffickers rely on face-to-face interactions. Given what information is known about the structure and operations of gang-affiliated trafficker and familial trafficker, this conclusion is not

surprising. No prior studies have looked at each subcategory of third-party trafficker individually when assessing use of social media.

While participants provided interesting insights into trust development, including how it occurs over social media, findings were inconclusive to support Hypothesis 2. No participants provided a clear distinction that trust development is either *easier* or *harder* when social media is involved in the grooming process.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3A, findings indicate that when social media is used as a tool in the grooming process, traffickers are less likely to rely on physical methods of control. Intuitively, this makes sense, given that many of the tangible methods of control discussed can only be employed in a face-to-face setting. In regard to psychological methods of control, the findings indicate that the psychological tactics used over social media and in face-to-face settings are similar. Responses do not indicate if psychological methods of control are used *more* or *less* when social media is involved. Thus, these findings do not support Hypothesis 3B. No prior study, to my knowledge, has specifically looked at the variation in both physical and psychological methods used in the grooming process when social media is used compared to when it is not used.

It is important to note that there is overlap between the trust development phase and the physical and psychological methods of control used by a trafficker. Two of the main themes with trust development, gifting and meeting basic needs, fall under methods of physical control because they imply that the trafficker provides tangible objects to the victim or moves the victim into their physical control (i.e. in their house). The two other themes identified with trust development, acceptance and compliments, are psychological in nature.

Only two participants provided information about how social media may impact the duration of the grooming process. The responses of the two participants who were able to provide information did not align. One indicated that social media would shorten the grooming process, while the other cited that it would lengthen it. Given these findings, support for Hypothesis 4 is inconclusive.

The fact that eight participants could not provide information for Hypothesis 4 is telling of ambiguity and widespread variation in regard to the duration of grooming. It is important to note that other factors, such as the victim's needs and previous childhood trauma, were referenced more frequently by participants as factors that impact the duration of the grooming process. No prior study, to my knowledge, has systematically assessed the impacts of a trafficker's use of social media in the grooming process on the duration of the grooming process as a whole.

Impacts of the Pandemic on DMST

Given the temporal proximity of the Coronavirus pandemic to this study, little (if any) other research has been done to assess the pandemic's impacts on DMST. Many participants were able to provide information on what impacts they had already observed and what they anticipated seeing in coming months. The general consensus was that the pandemic has made DMST worse in multiple different ways. Most notably, the pandemic has heightened victim vulnerabilities due to familial economic loss, lack of face-to-face interaction with peers, and diminished "safety net" or monitoring by mandated reporters. The long-term impacts of these increased vulnerabilities are not yet clear, but are likely significant.

Other Notable Findings

Many participants provided very valuable insight that was not directly linked to the study aims, but important nonetheless. Across interviews, there was a significant emphasis on traffickers meeting a victim's basic needs, more so than has been indicated in existing research. Participants emphasized that basic provisions are just as common, if not more common, than traffickers providing true "luxury" gifts. Multiple participants mentioned traffickers fulfilling Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs when describing trust development and methods of control. Maslow's Hierarchy describes the most fundamental basic needs, categorized as psychological (food, water, and shelter) and safety. Children who have grown up in an environment without these fundamental basic needs are extremely vulnerable.

Another common topic across interviews was that familial trafficking is often multigenerational and extremely difficult to disrupt. Participants that had knowledge of familial trafficking highlighted the many ways in which this process differs from pimp and gang-affiliated trafficking. One respondent emphasized the prominence of familial trafficking in rural communities, as well as the significant differences between trafficking in rural and urban settings. This distinction is another gap in existing research.

Limitations of the Study

This study provides qualitative information from 10 service providers, which is a small sample size. All participants were female and were based in only six states. The small sample size, lack of male perspectives, and little geographic diversity are limitations to the study's generalizability. Only one participant self-identified as working in a rural area. Given the information she provided about the differences between trafficking in rural and in urban communities, not having more rural community representation was a limitation.

Results reflect the lived experiences and personal perceptions of the ten participants and were dependent on the flow of the semi-structured interview. While participants provided very important information, more detailed probes were needed at times to maintain the focus of the study on social media's impacts on the grooming process rather than more general information. Additionally, some participants provided educated guesses for questions, while others were more conservative in their approach and chose not to respond to questions where they had any uncertainties. Given that the initial sample size was small (N=10), this further limited the findings of the study.

In regard to information about the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic, the initial insights were valuable, but more information is still to be determined. Information on what participants anticipate seeing in coming months may be grounded solely in opinion and not in fact. Further probes may have been helpful to ascertain perceptions of needed data to clarify the pandemic's impacts on DMST.

Lastly, two of the study participants requested interview questions in advance. They received an outline of questions that would be asked, including questions specifically about the role of social media in the grooming process. Seeing these questions beforehand could have biased these two participants to think about social media more in their responses than they would have otherwise, if they had not received the questions beforehand. While their responses were still included in the study, it is important to note this limitation.

Strengths of the Study

While this study has limitations, there are also many strengths to note. First and foremost, this study is directly focused on filling the gaps in existing literature through the perspectives of those working hands-on with victims and survivors. The semi-structured interview style of data

collection allowed for a large amount of information to be gathered from the participants. Given the intricacies of trafficking and of work in this field, a breadth of information from a select few may be more valuable in providing "a complete picture" than small tidbits of information from a large sample of people.

Secondly, this study's assessment of the impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic is extremely timely. This information can serve to inform and guide future action to assist trafficking victims and prevent further victimization of children in the post-pandemic world as well as in future national disasters.

Future Research

This study highlighted the reality that the way in which DMST victims are groomed in present day varies significantly. Even for those who work directly with victims on a day-to-day basis, many nuances of the grooming process remain unclear. Future research must probe more deeply into trust development, methods of control, and the length of the grooming process in general, as well as specifically when social media is involved.

In situations where the trafficker does initiate contact with a victim online, further research is necessary to assess how, when, and why the trafficker may advance this relationship to an in-person setting or choose to keep the conversation online. Again, based on the limited information received in this study, this process seems to vary significantly.

Specifically in regard to social media, future research is necessary to determine if and how the anonymity of social media apps benefits traffickers. Four respondents in this study indicated that the anonymity of social media is relevant; however, perceptions on this ranged widely. Additionally, given that the popularity of TikTok has grown exponentially over the past

year, future research should look specifically at this app and the ways in which traffickers may be using it to contact and converse with children.

Lastly, this study's findings indicated that many participants had little information on the specifics of gang-affiliated trafficking and that subcategory of traffickers' use of social media. Multiple participants acknowledged their lack of knowledge and mentioned that they were actively seeking more information about gang-affiliated trafficking.

Policy Implications

Policy initiatives could advance anti-trafficking work in three main areas: education, technology, and criminal justice. Within education policy, work must be done to design and implement awareness programs in public school systems nationwide. These programs could be designed and implemented at the local or state level. Given that the average age of a child trafficking victim is around 14, these education programs should begin in the middle school years and continue throughout high school. The program's goals must be two-fold. First, school-aged children must be made aware of what trafficking and victimization can look like and learn how to recognize grooming behavior, both in-person and online. Secondly, kids should be equipped with the life skills and emotional tools necessary to manage their own vulnerabilities and navigate difficult situations or relationships in their own life.

Within technology policy, social media companies must be incentivized to take steps to prevent the illicit activity occurring on their platforms. While study participants indicated that Instagram and Snapchat are most commonly used, victimization is widespread on many platforms. All of these social media sites should be targeted for this initiative. A short, in-app informational video about the warning signs of online victimization and how to contact help if needed could have significant impacts, if required for all minor users. Legislation intended to

target crimes against children has historically garnered bipartisan support, thus a Congressional initiative for this type of content on social media apps could be powerful.

Within criminal justice policy, initiatives should be taken to target the demand aspect of sex trafficking. Two study participants emphasized this area heavily in their interviews and guided attention to this area. One participant touted "a whole cultural shift" to combat the demand, as "traffickers have zero shame about what they do, they have zero remorse, they are audacious in their approach." A second participant discussed a mandated rehabilitation program, specifically for buyers who had been arrested, which focused on the root causes of why a man would buy sex from a child. She highlighted that rather than taking a punitive approach, this program takes the approach of "you victimized somebody because you yourself have felt victimized at some point, let's find out why." If this type of program was required for arrested offenders nationwide, it has the potential to deter future offenses and, more broadly, spread awareness on the realities of child sex trafficking in the United States.

VII. Conclusion

This study's primary objective was to provide qualitative information to fill existing gaps in the literature regarding the grooming process of DMST victims and social media's function in this process. Results indicated that social media is often used as a tool in the grooming process by pimp traffickers; however, gang-affiliated traffickers and familial traffickers tend to rely on more face-to-face communication. This study's focus on social media use in grooming by subcategory of trafficker is unique to the body of research on this topic. Results further indicated that when traffickers use social media in the grooming process, they are less likely to implement more tangible methods of control. Again, this study's focus on how social media usage may impact both the physical and psychological tactics used in grooming is unique to the existing

body of literature. Results about social media's impact on psychological methods of control, the trust development phase, and the duration of the grooming process were inconclusive and limited. While this study highlighted many important nuances of the grooming process, further research is necessary to continue to fill the gaps in literature on DMST.

Although DMST may not be the most pressing political issue in our country, the reality is that thousands of children are brutally exploited by sex traffickers within the walls of the US every single year. The ongoing Coronavirus pandemic has only exacerbated this reality. The long-term impacts of increased victim vulnerabilities and rise in demand during this pandemic have yet to be seen and are a significant source of concern for those working in the anti-trafficking field. Looking to the future, the commercial sex trafficking of American children is a critical area of focus for academic researchers, service providers, policymakers across sectors, and the general public.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

Background Questions:

1. How many years have you worked in your current position?
2. How many years have you worked with trafficking victims in total?
3. Approximately how many child victims have you worked with in total?

The focus of the following interview questions are on the grooming process of domestic minor sex trafficking victims. The grooming process refers to the period of time between initial identification and exploitation, when the trafficker seeks to build a relationship and gain control over the victim. Please try to answer based on your knowledge about minor victims (not adults) who have been trafficked within the borders of the US.

General Questions:

1. In your opinion, what is the most common way in which children are recruited into sex trafficking?
2. Can you describe the grooming process when the trafficker is a pimp?
3. Can you describe the grooming process when the trafficker is gang-affiliated?
4. Can you describe the grooming process when the trafficker is a relative of the victim?
5. What tactics do traffickers use to develop trust with a victim?
6. What methods do traffickers use to maintain control over the victim? (physical and psychological)
7. What is your estimate of the duration of the grooming process? Are there any factors that would shorten this timeframe?

Social Media Questions:

1. What is the role of social media in the grooming of child sex trafficking victims?
2. How do traffickers build trust with their victims over social media?
3. What methods of control are involved when traffickers initiate contact and/or groom the victim over social media? Are these different methods than the ones used in face-to-face settings?
4. Do pimp traffickers use social media to identify or groom their victims?
5. Do gang-affiliated traffickers use social media to identify or groom their victims?
6. Do familial traffickers use social media to groom their victims?
7. Do traffickers tend to gravitate towards using certain social media apps? Are they more able to groom victims on some platforms as compared to others?

Pandemic Questions:

1. How has the pandemic impacted domestic minor sex trafficking?
2. Has the pandemic impacted the grooming process and/or the role of social media in this process?

Background II (this will be asked last, interviewee does NOT have to answer):

1. Do you have any personal or familial experience with trafficking?

Appendix B: Participant Consent Form

You are being asked to be in a research study. A research study is designed to answer a scientific question. If you agree to be in the study you will be one of 10-12 people who are being studied, nationwide.

Why is this study being done?
This study is being done to answer the questions: (1) What methods do domestic minor sex traffickers use to groom victims in the United States? (2) How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted domestic minor sex trafficking? You are being asked to be in this research study because of your knowledge of the subject matter informed by a current position as a service provider working with child sex trafficking victims in the US.

Do you have to be in the study?
It is your decision to be part of this research study. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

What do I have to do if I choose to participate in this study?
If you are eligible and want to be part of the study, you will participate in 1 interview that will take approximately 40 minutes – 1 hour. You will not be compensated for your participation in the interview.

How is this study going to help you?
If you are in the study, you will be helping the researchers answer the study question. This research will be used for an Honors thesis at Emory University, and hopefully, for a peer reviewed publication on the grooming process.

What are the risks or discomforts I should know about before making a decision?
The study will take time. All studies have some risks. Some risks are relatively small, like being bored or losing time. Some are more serious – for this study, these include loss of privacy and breach of confidentiality. A full list of expected risks, their frequency and severity are in the "What are the possible risks and discomforts?" section of this document.

Alternatives to Joining This Study
Since this is not a treatment study, the alternative is not to participate.

Costs
There is no cost to the participant.

What Should I Do Next?
Read this form, or have it read to you. Make sure the study staff explain the study to you. Ask questions (e.g., about exact time commitment, about unfamiliar words, more details on specific procedures, etc.) Take time to consider this and talk about it with your family and friends.

Emory University
Consent to be a Research Subject

Title: Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking: An Evaluation of the Grooming of Domestic Minor Sex Trafficking Victims in a Digital Age

IRB #: 00002153

Principal Investigator: Emily Gade

Funding Source: N/A

Introduction

You are being asked to be in a research study. If you agree to be in the study you will be one of 10-12 people who are being studied, nationwide. This form is designed to tell you everything you need to think about before you decide to consent (agree) to be in the study or not to be in the study. It is entirely your choice. If you decide to take part, you can change your mind later on and withdraw from the research study. You can skip any questions that you do not wish to answer.

Before making your decision:

- Please carefully read this form or have it read to you
- Please ask questions about anything that is not clear

You can take a copy of this consent form, to keep. Feel free to take your time thinking about whether you would like to participate. By signing this form you will not give up any legal rights.

Study Overview

The purpose of this study is to gather information on (1) service provider perceptions of the grooming process of domestic minor sex trafficking victims and (2) the service provider's perspective on how the pandemic has impacted domestic minor sex trafficking and its victims. This information will be used in the co-investigator's undergraduate honors thesis for the Emory Department of Political Science.

Procedures

Study participation will require one phone interview, approx. 40 minutes to 1 hour in duration. In the interview, the participant will be asked questions relating to their professional knowledge of the grooming of domestic minor sex trafficking victims. The interviews will be audio-recorded, unless the participant requests otherwise.

Risks and Discomforts

There is the possible risk of loss of confidentiality. However, protocol will be strictly followed to ensure participant privacy and confidentiality of information. Your responses and identity will only be known by the PI and will remain confidential. Interview results will be analyzed in

aggregate. No questions will be asked that require identifying information about a specific individual, case, or location.

Benefits

This study is not designed to benefit you directly. This study is designed to learn more about the grooming of domestic minor sex trafficking victims in the United States. The study results may be used to help others in the future.

Compensation

You will not be offered payment for being in this study.

Confidentiality

Government agencies and Emory employees overseeing proper study conduct may look at your study records. These offices include the Emory Institutional Review Board and the Emory Office of Compliance. Emory will keep any research records we create private to the extent we are required to do so by law. A study number rather than your name will be used on study records wherever possible. Your name and other facts that might point to you will not appear when we present this study or publish its results.

Study records can be opened by court order. They may also be produced in response to a subpoena or a request for production of documents.

Storing and Sharing your Information

Your data from this study will not be shared with anyone outside this study, even if we take out all the information that can identify you. We will use your data only for research.

[Participants will receive aggregate results]

Once the study has been completed, a summary of results and conclusions will be available by request. We will not send you your individual results from this study.

Withdrawal from the Study

You have the right to leave a study at any time without penalty.

Contact Information

Contact the co-investigator, Lara Gemar, at 602-821-0422

- if you have any questions about this study or your part in it,
- if you have questions, or concerns about the research

Contact the Emory Institutional Review Board at 404-712-0720 or 877-503-9797 or irb@emory.edu:

- if you have questions about your rights as a research participant.
- if you have complaints about the research or an issue you rather discuss with someone outside the research team.

You may also let the IRB know about your experience as a research participant through our Research Participant Survey at **https://tinyurl.com/ycewgkke.**

TO BE FILLED OUT BY STUDY TEAM ONLY

Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion

Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent Discussion **Date** **Time**