

Sex Trafficking and the Attribution of Blame: A Comparison between  
Vietnamese and American Perception of Sex-trafficked Individuals

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### Abstract

Sex trafficking is one of the most persistent issues in Asian countries and specifically in Vietnam. Hundreds of Vietnamese are trafficked daily across the world, but mainly in Taiwan, Malaysia, South Korea, Laos, China, and Thailand. Sexually trafficked individuals are reported to have symptoms of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, suicidal tendencies, and physical violence. Despite the increasing number of victims, there is a lack of empirical research on issues relating to the impact of human trafficking on Vietnamese people and especially the public attitude about the problem. The current study examined the public's general knowledge of trafficking myths, their willingness to believe in the trafficking situation, and their tendency to place blame on the victim, in relation to the sex of the participants and the sex of the victims. Vietnamese citizens across the country (N= 922) responded to a vignette portraying a sex trafficking situation and completed the Human Trafficking Myth survey. Results indicated that the sex of the participants and the sex of the victims significantly correlated with the participants' perception of the human trafficking myths, trafficking story and victim's responsibility. Acknowledging the paucity of cross-culture empirical research, the current study also compared the Vietnamese sample with the American sample that completed similar scales. The results of study 1 and 2 have the potential to serve the needs of anti-trafficking campaigns in Vietnam and support the collaboration of different countries in their effort of combating human trafficking.

*Keyword:* Vietnam, sex trafficking, victim blaming, human trafficking myth scale

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Human trafficking is a prominent human right issue that impacts thousands of innocent lives across the globe. Several prior studies considered human trafficking to be a form of modern slavery that captures people of different ages and genders, but mainly targeting women and children (Bernat & Zhilina, 2011; Enrile, 2018). Despite various versions of the definition of human trafficking, prior studies agreed on the conventional definition provided by the United Nations (UN):

The recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring 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. (Assembly, 2003, p. 344)

Human trafficking includes trafficking of individuals for sex or labor as well as the trafficking of organs, but despite the reason, victims are prone to suffer from severe physical, sexual, and emotional abuse (Kiss et al., 2015). For the purpose of this study, the research solely focused on sex trafficking. According to the basic definition given by the UN, the Trafficking Victim Protection Acts defines sex trafficking as a “commercial sex act that is induced by force, fraud or coercion, or in which the person who is forced to perform such as has not attained 18 years or older” (U.S. Department of State, 2018, p. 3). These definitions demonstrate the inclusion of the three essential elements of trafficking: means, act, and purpose. Although the definition might not always accurately

reflect real-life scenarios, it is a comprehensive guideline for current training programs and a solid foundation for future reference and improvement.

Nations around the world have been devoting time and resources in fighting against human trafficking, but it continues to be a daunting problem. Social workers, counselors, law enforcers and society as a whole are facing numerous issues due to the vicious nature of trafficking. Traffickers are artful, and they continuously improvise to weaken the rule of law, strengthen the crime network, and ameliorate trafficking methods (U.S. Department of State, 2018). The ultimate goal of traffickers is to anesthetize gullible targets and make them voluntarily enter trafficking. Thus, many victims fail to recognize they are being trafficked because of their trauma bond with the trafficker. Mehlman-Orozco (2017) interviewed sex trafficking offenders to investigate the identification of traffickers and found two common themes: heroes and lovers. The offenders believed that they have saved the girls' life and given them a brighter future. Many girls experienced domestic violence, abuse, and neglect before the recruitment, so they were prone to the help of traffickers (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). Other offenders believed that they genuinely loved their girls; however, it was only a fabricated love that created a strong trauma bond between them and the victims. Due to the complicated relationship between victims and offenders, trafficking scenarios are ambiguous. While offenders refuse to admit the crime they committed, the victims often reject their identities and protect the traffickers (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). The victims are trained to believe that they are willing participants, which make it difficult for law enforcers to classify them whether as trafficked individuals, sex workers, or even traffickers.

Additionally, most of the victims are excluded from the community because trafficking is an activity that is often overlooked by the public. The isolation of those trafficked individuals only creates more myths that further establish stereotypes held by law enforcement and community members that hinder their abilities to identify trafficking (Mehlman- Orozco, 2017). It is an arduous task because of the ambiguity of terminology. The rise of the feminist movement introduced new terminologies such as the terms, sex worker and sex trade. The feminist-approach attempts to decriminalize sex workers with the purpose of empowering them to make safe choices (Riley, 2017). While this approach seems to advocate for the benefit of women, it unintentionally engenders more problems.

Law enforcers must differentiate prostitutes, sex workers, and trafficked, despite their insufficient training (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). The term prostitute connotes commercial sex worker, but it is commonly linked to criminality and immorality (McMilan, Worth, & Rawstorne, 2018). Thus, this term is often used by countries that consider selling or receiving sex to be a criminal offense (McMilan, Worth, & Rawstorne, 2018). Throughout the history, the word *prostitute* is slowly replaced by the term *sex worker*. Sex workers are individuals who engage in sex industry by choice (Meshkovska, Siegel, Stutterheim, & Bos, 2015). They often work under the government's regulation and receive basic rights and protections. Sex workers might engage in other related sexual activities that might not be deemed as prostitution including stripping, erotic dancing, and pornography (McMilan, Worth, & Rawstorne, 2018; Meshkovska, Siegel, Stutterheim, & Bos, 2015). Despite the fact that sex work is legalized, sex workers are still at risk of sexual exploitation and abuse. In contrast,

trafficked individuals do not give consent and do not enter sex industry by choice.

Although the concept of trafficking, sex work, and prostitution can be differentiated, trafficking scenarios might be ambiguous because they only project the current engagement in sexual activity, not the process that leads the individuals to sex industry.

Besides having a similar appearance, those trafficked individuals often hide the truth behind their story. After being held for an extended period, the victims might become doubtful because traffickers deconstructed their hope, dignity, and freedom (Sukach, Castañeda, & Picken, 2018). They would not reveal their background honestly to somebody whom they do not trust, especially if they feel threatened. The victims often feel as if society does not understand their struggles. Society tends to attribute its subjective storylines created by myths and misunderstanding to the victims.

Unfortunately, not many people attempt to clarify those myths, which continue to engender the miscommunication amongst the victims, law enforcers, social workers, and the public thus presents a barrier to victim identification (Sukach et al., 2018).

According to the U.S Department of State (2018), countries can fall into three different categories: source, transit, and destination country. Source countries include those that provide a large number of men, women, and children for trafficking demands. For example, Benin is the largest source country for trafficking victims in the Republic of Congo (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Customers either go to these countries, or traffickers get victims from those countries to distribute around the globe. After getting the supply, traffickers go to transit countries, which are geographically close to the attractive destination. All transit countries share similar characteristics including inadequate legislation, minimal policies against human trafficking, and lenient

immigration policies that allow operational criminals to initiate illegal entry and exit from a country (Perrin, 2010). Canada is the transit country for the United States because traffickers can deliver their orders by air, land, and sea. As soon as the victims arrive at the destination country, traffickers sell them into brothels, massage parlors, and bars for sexual exploitation or work labor (Perrin, 2010). A country may fall into more than one category, which makes tackling prevention, protection and prosecution more difficult. Thus, multilateral cooperation would enhance the effectiveness of anti-trafficking programs and expedite the rescue and prosecution process, yet the lack of comparative research challenges the ability for multilateral cooperation. Acknowledging the dearth of cross-cultural research on human trafficking, the researcher compared the Vietnamese and American population on their perception of sex trafficking with the expectation that the result would inform both countries about the current scenarios and create opportunities for future cooperation.

### **Definition of Human Sex Trafficking in Vietnam**

In contrast to the definition given by the UN, other countries define trafficking distinctively, which might not be as comprehensive. For instance, Vietnamese laws related to human trafficking have some common components with the international standard; however, it does not fully reflect the means (threat, coercion, abduction, and deception) and acts of trafficking (recruitment, transportation, transfer, and harbor). Articles 119 and 120 of the Penal Code 1999 identify trafficking as “trading, fraudulently exchanging or appropriating” humans for inhuman purposes which are committed in an “organized manner and cause serious consequence” (Trinh, 2015, p. 57). It is important to note that trafficking might not always be carried out in an organized manner. The



terminology is also obscure. The definition mentions “serious consequences”, but the scale for seriousness is not provided. Article 120 also mentions “for villainous purposes”, which does not clearly explain the purpose of trafficking (Trinh, 2015, p. 57). The ambiguous terms can preclude the law enforcers from making the right judgment and creating allowance for traffickers to contravene the law.

Moreover, article 119 identifies only women and article 120 only provides protection for children. Other groups such as men or LGBT community were not mentioned in the Penal Codes. Men represent half of the number of trafficking victims, but they do not receive sufficient attention. Lastly, both Article 119 and 120 solely mention trafficking for prostitution, which narrows the exposure to other purposes such as work labor and organ removal. The shortcoming of the law leads to confusion and creates trafficking myths. The Penal Codes were revised in 2017 and were noticeably improved by adding more detailed description trafficking situation, but it remained to be a specious provision for trafficking victims (Trinh, 2015). A well-written law and law enforcers who do not fully understand the protocol would not meet the demand of the victims.

### **A Comparison of Sex Trafficking Profile**

The nature of human trafficking varies depending on the living standard, education level, and the culture of that country. According to Trinh (2015), Vietnam is considered to be a source country. From 2007 to 2014, the government identified 6,628 victims. In 2016, 1,028 victims were reported; however, the government did not categorize the cases according to types of trafficking, gender, and age (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Therefore, it is challenging to collect accurate data on the number of sex

trafficked victims. Despite the paucity of data, a vast number of Vietnamese individuals are still trafficked domestically and internationally for sexual exploitation (Trinh, 2015). Vietnamese victims tend to be trafficked to China, Cambodia, Thailand, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore, and Korea. Many of the individuals are abducted by strangers and sold into brothels within the country and across the border. In other cases, victims are deceived into sex work by different insidious methods that are more challenging to identify such as marriage, work labor, debt bondage, and a proposal of intimate relationship (Dong et al., 2017; Enrile, 2018; Verhoeven, Van Gestel, De Jong, & Kleemans, 2013; Vijayarasa, 2010). Many rural areas are still struggling with poverty and low level of education; therefore, a number of unsuspecting low-income families are vulnerable to be tricked into selling their daughters into marriage to solve financial difficulties (Dong et al. 2017, Trinh, 2015). This marriage creates a once in a lifetime opportunity for the family to be debt-free. In Vietnamese culture, debt bondage can entail life-threatening consequences such as a family member being murdered or mutilated if the debt is not paid on time (Dong et al., 2017). Victims are mostly married to men from China or South Korea (Trinh, 2015; U. S. Department of State, 2018). After arriving at the country, the women are abused and then sold into brothels by their husbands. Other victims do not believe in brokered marriage, but they are deceived by legitimate international job opportunities. Some common markets for work labor are Japan and South Korea, but victims can also be subjected to sex trafficking in Ghana, Maldives, Russia (U.S. Department of State, 2018). The victims are promised that they are going to work for a factory or a restaurant abroad, so they do not need to know the language. As soon as they arrive in a foreign country, they are forced into prostitution.

Due to the contract that they signed, they might have to pay thousands of dollars if they quit (U.S. Department, 2018). The traffickers also take away their legal documents and passport to prevent them from escaping.

Similar to work labor, traffickers often use debt bondage as a mean of trafficking (Enrile, 2018; (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). These victims incur thousands of dollars in debt, which increase their vulnerability of being trafficked. Consequently, they are either sold by their parents or “voluntarily” sign a contract to work for the recruiters, but mainly focus on sex work. They would not be free until they pay off their debt (Enrile, 2018; Trinh, 2015). Besides, a romantic relationship is also a common mean of trafficking (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017; Verhoeven et al., 2013). This type of relationship allows traffickers to build rapport and exploit the victims. With the development of the internet and social media, many traffickers easily lured the victims into romantic relationships. They persuade the innocent victims to either go on a vacation or move in with them and then sell these individuals into brothels and bars (Verhoeven et al., 2013). In other circumstances, traffickers might use romantic relationship to recruit for his own business. As the girls perceive themselves as girlfriend, they decide to stay despite the frequent abuse and exploitation (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). Some of them are compelled to return to their traffickers even after being rescued. The traffickers might also train victims to be their professional recruiters for the business (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017).

While Vietnam is a source country, the United States (U.S.) is a source, transit, and destination country. The diverse trafficking nature in the United States allows sex trade to be a low risk and high reward business. Although it is common believed that the main trafficking population are immigrants, there is a shocking number of the United

States citizens that are trafficked locally and internationally (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Both countries are different in many aspects, but the trafficking means are relatively similar. Traffickers always aim for recruiting the vulnerable including those who are financially unstable. Even though the living standard in the U.S. is much higher than Vietnam, economic conditions still trap many people in trafficking. Victims tend to lose their vigilance when traffickers offer jobs, houses, and gifts (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). Romantic relationships are also one of the most common reasons that leads people to become victims of sex trafficking. There are many cases that the female victims get married to their "pimp" (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). Their husbands force them to engage in commercial sex and even ask them to help run the business if they are capable. The longer the victims are bound to the traffickers, the more difficult for them to leave the situation. Love, loyalty, children, and financial status preclude them from escaping (Mehlman-Orozco, 2017). Using marriage as a tool to recruit the vulnerable occurs to both countries, yet Vietnamese trafficked individuals are more likely to be transported overseas than an U.S. citizen.

Child sex trafficking is different in Vietnam than the United States. Children are a vulnerable population in both countries, especially those in the children welfare and juvenile system. Runaway children are also at risk of being trafficked. According to the U.S Department of State (2018), the demand for Vietnamese children is rising. Asia, United Kingdom, Europe, and the United States reported to have exploited Vietnamese children for child sex tourists. Compared to Vietnamese, it is more common for American men to go to other countries for child sex tourism. Costa Rica is one of the population sites for child sex tourism that attracts a myriad of Americans every year (U.S.

Department of State, 2018). Thus, it would be beneficial for both countries to cooperate and prevent the rise of child sex tourism.

### **An Evaluation of Anti-trafficking Effort**

Nations around the globe have continuously concentrated on improving their anti-trafficking program; however, some of them do not meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking (U.S Department, 2018). Notably, Vietnam fails to meet the international requirements for prevention, intervention, and prosecution. It is crucial to have an accurate data collection to conduct research on trafficking, navigate strategy, and develop effective programs for raising awareness; however, the data remains undeveloped. The government asserts a nationwide computer database, but this system gives incomplete and overlapping data that impedes the investigation process and research (U.S Department, 2018). Consequently, the government reported a significant decrease in victims compared to the number of identified victims in 2016, despite the insufficient effort in fighting against trafficking. There are a few factors that encounter for the short-comings of the anti-trafficking program. The major problem is the ineffective training program for law enforcers and social workers. The government evaluated and improved Article 150-151 of the Penal Code, but there is still a lack of interagency coordination (U.S Department, 2018). Provincial agencies demonstrate a superficial understanding of the new legislation protocols, their roles, and their responsibilities as an essential part of the national plan. As a results, the persecution process as well as the methods to identify and support the victims are inconsistent. At some village levels that are more vulnerable to sex trafficking, local officials demonstrate their moral corruption through receiving bribes from traffickers. Despite their hideous

crime against the national plan, they have not been investigated or convicted for their actions for six consecutive years (U.S Department, 2018). Not only does the government struggle with implementing the policy, but it also fails to provide law enforcers and social workers necessary tools to support the trafficked individuals. Most of the officers have problems with identifying the victims and appropriately interacting with them (U.S Department, 2018). Even though Article 150-151 of the Penal Code has been modified, the definition of trafficking remains ambiguous. It precludes the officials from navigating and recognizing trafficking situations, which are innately tortuous (U.S Department, 2018). Besides, they might also have a different perception of trafficked individuals. Vietnamese culture holds a high standard for family values and characteristics of a woman. Anything that diminishes the family value like prostitution is not tolerated in Vietnam, not to mention that prostitution is also illegal in the country. Therefore, trafficked victims often encounter unpleasant experiences with the police. Without proper training and flexibility, the police might struggle with disaggregating sex trafficking from voluntarily sex work. They might consider the victims as criminals and often make comments that provoke the victims' negative emotions.

Law enforcement and protection services often fail to satisfy the needs of trafficking victims. The government has tried to commensurate the protection plan that allows the individuals to request psychological assistance, offer employment training, and funding, but there is a dearth of trained personnel to provide adequate psychological services. With the support from the NGO, more safe houses have been built to serve the victims; however, these centers are reported to be unevenly staffed and under resourced.

In addition, Vietnam is a source country, so a majority of victims are deported from Vietnam to other countries. Therefore, the government is devoted to developing an anti-trafficking program across the border that aims to break the international trafficking chain. The government has also started to offer victims psychological services and send them to safe houses after rescuing them from destination countries (Vijeyarasa, 2010). However, there is a lack of plans for trafficked individuals within the country and foreign citizens (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Many victims are reported to deport from Laos and Cambodia to Vietnam for sexual exploitation. Nevertheless, the U. S. Department of State's report on trafficking implements that a lot of foreigners were deported from Vietnam without being referred to protection services (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

Compared to Vietnam, the United States is a Tier 1 country because its anti-trafficking program meets the minimum standard (U.S. Department of State, 2018). In contrast to the Vietnamese national plan, the United States also grants T nonimmigrant status for foreign national victims. This type of immigration relief allows the victims to receive services and temporarily remain in the United States, while the traffickers are investigated and prosecuted. Another advancement of the US anti-trafficking effort is prosecution (U.S. Department of State, 2018). The government continuously implements stricter consequences and prosecutes more offenders. Moreover, both countries have to overcome many similar challenges such as the public's perception, myths, and identification. Although research on human trafficking in the United States is more advanced than research in Vietnam, people still find it difficult to identify a trafficking situation (U.S. Department of State, 2018). Stigmatization and victim blame due to the

acceptance of myth prevent both countries to develop an appropriate training program and to treat the victims with love and compassion (Cromer & Cunningham, 2016).

### **Victim Blaming and Sex Trafficking Myths**

Whether the sex trafficked individuals should be responsible for their traumatic experience remains a controversial issue. People are influenced by their own cultures, belief systems, and their surroundings which explain why they determine the cause of an event differently. Thus, it is beneficial to examine the attribution of blame founded by Weiner (1980) to understand how people decide the cause and what might influence their decisions.

#### **The Attribution of Blame**

Weiner (1980) conducted a study to examine the theory of attribution. He created two scenarios: drunkenness and illness. The participants randomly assigned to see a drunk or an ill man. Then, the researcher observed the participants' behaviors. The researchers reported that participants would be more likely to have a positive attitude toward the man with an illness than the drunk man. The findings suggested that the cognition which is the perception of the event, engenders the motivation to search for causation. As the cause is determined, people will either choose a help or neglect reaction of the event. Overall, attitude significantly influenced the participants' helping judgment (Weiner, 1980). His theoretical model of attribution has been used to explain different situations in which the victims are held responsible for the consequences, especially with sexual assault cases. Sheldon and Parent (2002) examined the clergy's attitude and reaction to sexually abused victims, and they found that the clergy with more conservative view of gender roles and religion are less likely to have sympathy for the



victims and believe in their stories, which limit the victims' opportunities to file their cases and receive necessary services. Similarly, in trafficking cases, if the victims are determined to be the cause, the event will likely be followed by avoidance reactions and judgment.

The attribution of blame varies depending on the gender of the victims and the gender of the perpetrators (Ayala, Kotary, & Hetz, 2018). Females remain the majority of sexual violence victims, so male victims tend to receive more blame unless the perpetrators are women. Among the perpetrators, people will attribute more blame on females than on males. Nonetheless, it is important to note that victims are still more likely to be blamed than those who commit the crime. Some research suggested that due to the traumatic experience, males attribute more blame on victims than females (Ayala et al., 2018; Cunningham & Cromer, 2016).

The attribution of blame has been reported to associate with myths and myth acceptance (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). The more strongly a person adhere to myths, the more likely they are to blame the victim. The correlation between myth and the attribution of blame has been applied in many situations. Various studies on the effects of rape myths and victim blame confirm that the adherence to rape myths negatively influence people's attitudes on sexually assaulted victims (Ayala et al., 2018; Sheldon & Parent, 2002). Similarly, victims who are involved in sex work, especially females, can be arrested for prostitution offenses (Franklin & Menaker, 2015). Although many factors interfere with the reasons why those individuals are involved in prostitution including running away from home, survival sex for self-sustenance, abuse history, and dysfunctional family, victims tend to receive blame for their decisions to engage in sex

work (Franklin & Menaker, 2015). The criminal justice decision makers may attribute blame to the victims and are less willing to sympathize with them. Myths can manipulate people's perception of the victims, which influence their feelings and behaviors as a consequence (Cromer & Cunningham, 2018).

### **Myths Relating to Sex Trafficking**

Due to the complicated nature of sex trafficking, the stigmatization of trafficked individuals stems from many different types of myths.

**Rape myths.** Rape myths are myths that justify the act of raping of an individual (Cromer & Cunningham, 2016). It includes many false beliefs about victims and perpetrators. Instead of supporting the victims, rape myths focus on demonstrating "ideal victims" and "ideal perpetrators" (Larcombe, 2002, p. 131). The victims are expected to always report immediately after the incident and protect themselves by wearing appropriate clothes, not going out alone at night, and avoid vulnerable situations (Larcombe, 2002). Therefore, if the incident happens, it must have been the victims' responsibility for not protecting themselves (Cromer & Cunningham, 2016). In contrast, the perpetrators should be tolerated because "the victims make them lose control of themselves" (Larcombe, 2002, p. 141).

Rape myths have a direct negative impact on the victims because they increase the likelihood of blaming the victim, hinder the victims' willingness to report their cases, and influence the jury members' perception of the perpetrators' guiltiness (Cromer & Cunningham, 2016). Rape can happen to both men and women, but female cases are more familiar to the general public. Prior studies have suggested that there is a

correlation between rape myth acceptance and the sex of the victims (Cromer & Cunningham, 2016).

**Prostitution myths.** Prostitution myths are false beliefs that consider individuals who involved in sex work as solely as a sex object (Cromer & Cunningham, 2016). These myths manipulate the public's perception of the victims' pain by emphasizing sexual pleasure and economic benefits that they assume the victims receive. The myths deny the possibility that the prostitutes are raped because they can never be violated and cannot be harmed by rape (Sullivan, 2007). Similar to rape myths, prostitution myths also lead to a higher likelihood to blame on the victims and prevent the victims from reporting their cases.

Prostitution has been perceived as a moral corruption that destroys family values in both Eastern and Western cultures (Vijayarasa, 2016); however, prostitution has also been legalized in many countries including Costa Rica, Thailand, United Kingdom and others. Its legalization introduced several new terminologies including *sex work*, *sex industry*, and *sex worker*. Under the development of the feminist movement, women are encouraged to change their mindset of sex work (Riley, 2017). Some feminists indicate that women are free to decide what to do with their bodies, in fact, they even empower women through sex work. Legal sex workers receive medical benefits, work in a safe environment, and follow government legislation. While legalization offers prostitutes better work condition, it might also conflate sex work from involuntary prostitution and create more myths (Riley, 2017).

**Human trafficking myths.** Sex trafficking scenario is complex and challenging to identify, especially when they are influenced by human trafficking myths (Cromer &

Cunningham, 2016). Myths create false beliefs about the characteristics of trafficking and trafficked individuals (Cromer & Cunningham, 2016). The public is familiar with the image of an ideal victim portrayed by the media which is a young, naive, vulnerable child, but promiscuous youth is the image that people see in real life. Thus, people are more likely to assume the victims to be willful workers, instead of sex trafficked individuals. Meanwhile, the media portrays traffickers as hideous organized criminals despite the fact that victims are often familiar with their recruiters. In many cases, recruiters can be family members, boyfriends, or online friends (Cromer & Cunningham, 2016; Trinh, 2015; Verhoeven et al., 2013).

A prior study indicated that human trafficking myths can influence people's attitude toward human trafficking and their likelihood to blame the victim (Cunningham & Cromer, 2016). Due to the lack of empirical research on human trafficking in the Vietnamese literature, the present study replicated previous research on the public's perception of trafficking with Vietnamese population to study more in depth this issue.

### **Gap in the Literature**

The effectiveness of anti-trafficking effort in part depends on quality empirical research to inform decision makings. Research about the impact of terminology, victim blaming, media, and victim's health would help the government, social workers, and law enforcers to respond appropriately to the needs of the trafficked victims. There is a lack of research that is country and culture specific (Kiss et al., 2015). Data on the trafficking issue was not collected properly, as such the estimated data fails to reflect the issue (Trinh, 2015; U.S. Department of State, 2018). Anti-trafficking organizations are not aware of the accurate data on this issue or any related empirical research on the

psychological impact of human trafficking on trafficked individuals (L. T. H. Le, personal communication, September 17, 2017). A small number of studies on human trafficking in Vietnam have been conducted by foreigners and was not presented in the Vietnamese literature. Due to the lack of research, it is essential to study the impact of Vietnamese public's perception of sex- trafficked individuals (Weiner, 1980). Besides, there is a dearth of empirical cross-culture study on the association between human trafficking myths and victim blame, so this study also compared Vietnamese and American population's level of myth acceptance and willingness to blame the victims to investigate how race and culture would impact the public's perception of sex trafficked individuals.

### **Research Question**

**Study 1.** Is there a correlation between human trafficking myth scale, belief score, and victim blame score? Do the sex of the participants and the sex of the victims' influence the participants' willingness to believe in the trafficking situation, tendency to blame the victims, and likelihood to adhere to myth?

**Study 2.** Is there a significant difference in the human trafficking myth scores between a Vietnamese sample and American sample? Do the gender of the victims and the nationality of the participants influence participants' willingness to believe in the trafficking situation, tendency to blame the victims, and likelihood to adhere to myth?

## Study 1

### Method

**Participants.** Participants were Vietnamese citizens, who currently lived in Vietnam and were older than 18 years old ( $N= 899$ , 52.6% female, 45.6% male). There were 1611 participants who opened the online survey link, but the researcher abruptly closed the online survey due to insufficient funding. Therefore, 611 participants were excluded because they did not finish the survey. The researcher also excluded 101 participants from the remaining data because they did not answer all of the questions in the survey. The participants were recruited using convenience and snowball sampling.

**Procedure.** After obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB), the survey was distributed both online through Qualtrics and handed out to participants. After answering demographic questions, participants were randomly assigned one of the two vignettes: a vignette of a girl named “Huong” or a boy named “Hung”, who were victims of trafficking. The participants then rated their answers for 16 items in the HTMS. Finally, the participants were debriefed and were given a compensation of \$2 (50,000 vietnam dong). The survey was analyzed to determine if the Vietnamese general public is more likely to believe in the myth and blame the victims.

### Measures.

**Victim blaming.** The participants were given a vignette that portrayed a possible trafficking situation. This scenario was used to measure the participants’ willingness to believe in a trafficking situation and their tendency to blame the victim. Since males and females can be trafficking victims, the vignette had both versions (see Appendix B). After reading the vignette, participants were asked to rate two statements on a Likert

scale of 1 (definitely false) to 6 (definitely true) (Appendix B). The first statement which indicated: “The situation is believable” was used to investigate whether the participants would believe in the trafficking scenario. A high score represented a high belief in the situation. The second statement stated that “The individual is responsible for this situation.” A high score demonstrated a high tendency to blame the victims.

**Myth scale.** The Human Trafficking Myths Scale (HTMS) was used to measure participants’ likelihood to accept myths. The scale included 17 items demonstrating distorted beliefs about the nature of human trafficking, characteristics of trafficked individuals, and victim agencies. One item was excluded from the survey because it did not accurately reflect the trafficking nature of Vietnam. Participants rated each item on a Likert scale of 1 (definitely false) to 6 (definitely true), and item 5 was reverse scored (see Appendix A). These items were validated by human trafficking experts and exhibited high face validity and good internal consistency reliability (Cronbach's alpha = .73). Higher scores represent a greater belief in faulty beliefs about human trafficking and its victims.

## Results

**Descriptive statistic.** Due to the missing data, 101 out of 1000 participants were excluded from the study. In general, the participants’ belief score implied that they had moderate belief in the accuracy of the trafficking situation ( $M= 4.43$ ,  $SD=1.48$ , on a scale of 1 to 6 where a score of 3.2 or higher suggest some level of belief). Overall, the participants’ victim blaming score indicated that they had fair belief in the victims’ responsibility ( $M=3.37$ ,  $SD=1.75$ ). The mean human trafficking score showed that the participants had general agreement with human trafficking myths ( $M=3.25$ ,  $SD=0.71$ ).

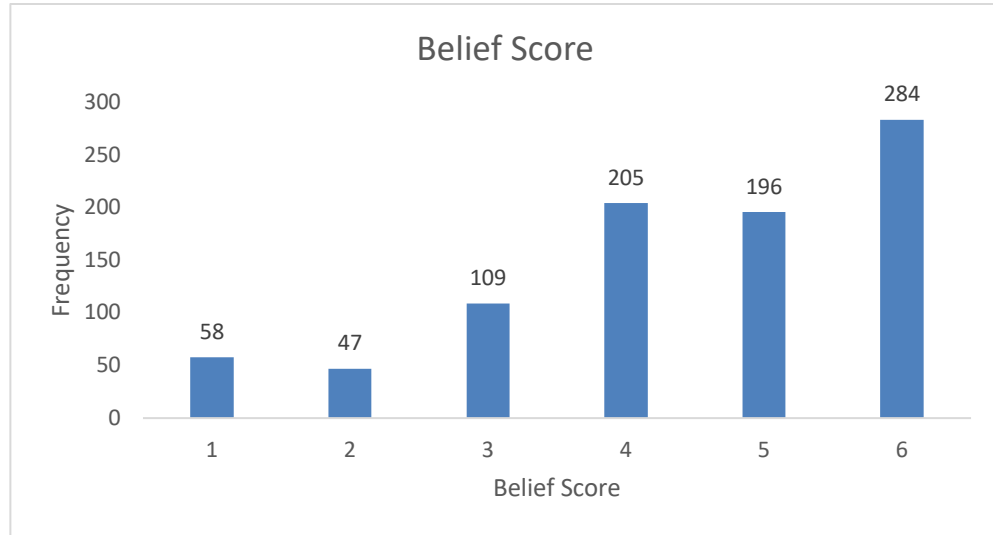


Figure 1. Frequency of victim blame score of a sample of 899 Vietnamese

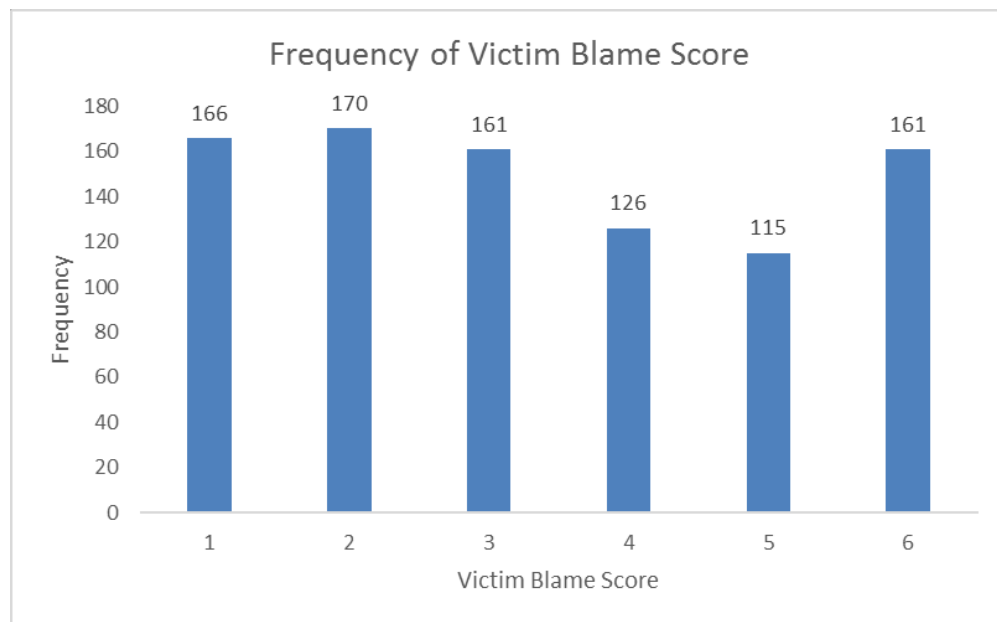


Figure 2. Frequency of victim blame score of a sample of 899 Vietnamese



Table 1

*Descriptive statistic of HTMS score, belief score, and victim blame score*

		HTMS Score	Belief Score	Victim Blame
N	Valid	899	899	899
	Missing	0	0	0
Mean		3.2562	4.4305	3.3749
Median		3.2500	5.0000	3.0000
Mode		2.88 <sup>a</sup>	6.00	2.00
Std. Deviation		.71747	1.48654	1.74763
Variance		.515	2.210	3.054
Range		4.38	5.00	5.00
Minimum		1.31	1.00	1.00
Maximum		5.69	6.00	6.00

a. Multiple modes exist. The smallest value is shown

### **Hypothesis testing.**

***Hypothesis 1.*** The first hypothesis was that there was a correlation between human trafficking myth, belief, and victim blaming score. To test this hypothesis, the researcher conducted a Pearson Correlation to determine the relationship among the three variables. There was a negative correlation between human trafficking myths and belief, which was statistically significant ( $r = -.122, p < 0.001$ ). There was a positive correlation between human trafficking myth and victim blame ( $r = .174, p < .001$ ). No significant relationship was found between belief and victim blaming score ( $r = .008, ns$ ). The results indicated that higher human trafficking score correlated with lower belief score and higher victim blaming score.

***Hypothesis 2.*** The second hypothesis was that the sex of the participants and the sex of the victims would influence participants' tendency to adhere to myth, willingness to believe in the trafficking situation, and tendency to blame the victims. The researcher

used MANOVA to test this hypothesis with sex of the participants and sex of the victims as a two-level independent variables. Scores on belief, victim blame, and human trafficking myth acceptance are three dependent variables. Using Pillai's trace, there was a significant effect of sex of the participants on three dependent variables,  $V = 0.45$ ,  $F(3, 893) = 14.11$ ,  $p < .001$ . The univariate results indicated that sex of the participants produced statistically significant differences in belief,  $F(1, 895) = 20.3$ ,  $p < .001$ ; victim blame,  $F(1, 895) = 9.52$ ,  $p = .002$ ; and human trafficking myth acceptance,  $F(1, 895) = 9.56$ ,  $p = .002$ . Men had lower means on belief than did women and had higher means on both victim blame and human trafficking myth acceptance than did women.

Statistically significant differences between sex of the victims emerged for the combined dependent variables,  $V = 0.23$ ,  $F(3, 893) = 7.044$ ,  $p < .001$ . However, separate univariate ANOVAs on the outcome variables only revealed significant effect on belief score,  $F(1, 895) = 20.69$ ,  $p < .001$ ; and non-significant effect on both victim blame  $F(1, 895) = 9.52$ ,  $p = ns$  and human trafficking myth acceptance,  $F(1, 895) = 9.52$ ,  $p = ns$ . The mean score of the female vignette was significantly higher than the mean score of the male vignette ( $p < .001$ ), which indicated that the participants are more likely to believe in the vignette if the main character is a female.

## **Discussion**

The first study suggested that human trafficking is a significant predictor of victim blaming and belief in trafficking situation. The results complied with the findings of previous studies (Crommer & Cunningham, 2016; Weiner, 1980). Misconceptions may decrease assistance for the victim. Many trafficked individuals are afraid of

reaching out for help because of the fear of being stigmatized. People in their community only see them being involved in sex work and associate them with prostitution. The public often think that "prostitutes are criminals and buyers are victims" (Sukach et al., 2018, p.14133). They might also argue that "trafficking is not real" or blames the victim "those women choose this life" (Sukach et al., 2018, p.14133). The sense of isolation and unworthiness discourages women from leaving prostitution and seeking help. As they have been captured for an extended period, they do not know how to reintegrate with the community. Even if they managed to escape, they would be at high risk of falling into those traps again (Sukach et al., 2018). The findings emphasized the importance of raising awareness and sympathy as in the context of fighting against human trafficking.

The researcher also found a significant impact of sex of the victims on the public's willingness to believe in the trafficking situation and the tendency to blame the victim. The results confirmed that female victims are more likely to be believed as trafficked individuals (Lee et al., 2005). The results also suggested that Vietnamese women are more likely than Vietnamese men to believe in a trafficking situation. This findings were consistent with the results of prior studies (Cromer & Cunning, 2016; Lee et al., 2005; Schneider et al., 2009). In addition, the results indicated that men are more likely than women to adhere to human trafficking myths, while women are more likely than men to blame the victim. This finding contradicted the findings of the previous studies. Culture can be a plausible explanation for the aberration as the Asian culture holds a high expectation of women. Women are typically demanded to conform to their responsibility as "dutiful wives" (Tonsing, 2014). Their traditional role is to maintain the aesthetic values of family and protect the reputation of the family, regardless of whether they are

daughters, wives, or daughters in law (Tonsing, 2014). Thus, a woman who loses her dignity, reputation, and purity due to her involvement in prostitution eventually becomes the shame of the family. As well, Laufer and Gillespie (2004) conducted a study to examine the correlation between sex and the attribution of blame. Their results suggested women are more likely to blame the victim because they feel more personally connected to a similar situation that might happen to them (Laufer & Gillespie, 2004). Therefore, it is possible that Vietnamese women tend to attribute more blame to trafficked individuals because they are more personally vulnerable to being deceived into trafficking. Vietnamese women are under pressure of fulfilling their roles that they expect others to do the same. However, there is a paucity of research that examines the impact of cultural value on the attribution of blame on sex trafficked individuals. Thus, more research needs to be conducted to examine this hypothesis.

## **Study 2**

### **Method**

**Participants.** Study 2 used a data collection that was collected by a prior study. The secondary study collected data from American sample that had 322 participants. The participants were Liberty University Undergraduate students. The researcher randomly drew 325 participants from the Vietnamese population.

**Measures and procedure.** Both study 1 and study 2 used the same measurements: a human trafficking myth scale and a vignette that portrayed a trafficking scenario. The human trafficking myth scale and the vignette were translated to Vietnamese. Study 2 used the data collected from study 1 to compare with the archival data collected by previous study.

## Results

**Descriptive statistic.** Both the American sample ( $M= 5.74$ ) and the Vietnamese sample ( $M= 4.49$ ) had high belief in the trafficking situation. Nonetheless, there was a difference in victim blame scores between the two samples. While the American sample received a low victim blame score ( $M= 1.32$ ), which represented low tendency to blame the victim, the Vietnamese sample received moderate victim blame score ( $M= 3.34$ ). It is important to note that there are a few outliers in the Vietnamese sample that had victim blame score rank from 5-6, which indicated a high tendency to blame the victim. The Vietnamese sample also had moderate belief in human trafficking myths ( $M= 3.23$ ); in contrast, the American sample slightly disagreed with the human trafficking myths ( $M= 2.3$ ).

### Hypothesis testing

**Hypothesis 3.** The researcher hypothesized that there was a significant difference in the mean score of trafficking myth scale between American and Vietnamese sample. The researcher conducted a two-way independent t-test to test this hypothesis. The results indicated that there was a significant difference in the mean human trafficking myth score between American and Vietnamese sample  $t(646) = 11.436, p < .001$ . The mean human trafficking myth score of the American sample ( $M=2.3$ ) was significantly lower than the mean human trafficking myth score of the Vietnamese sample ( $M=3.23$ ).

**Hypothesis 4.** The fourth hypothesis was that the sex of the victim and the nationality of the participant would influence participants' tendency to adhere to myth, willingness to believe in the trafficking situation, and tendency to blame the victims. The researcher used MANOVA to test this hypothesis with nationality of the participants and

sex of the victims as a two-level independent variables. Scores on belief, victim blame, and human trafficking myth acceptance are three dependent variables. Using Pillai's trace, there was a significant effect of nationality of the participants on three dependent variables,  $V = 0.55$ ,  $F(3, 643) = 260.83$ ,  $p < .001$ . The univariate results indicated that nationality of the participants produced statistically significant differences in belief,  $F(1, 643) = 53.41$ ,  $p < .001$ ; victim blame,  $F(1, 643) = 120.61$ ,  $p < .001$ . The results indicated that the American sample's belief score was significantly higher than Vietnamese's belief score ( $M=5.74$ ), while American sample's victim blame score was significantly lower than male's victim blame score ( $M= 4.49$ ).

Statistically significant differences between sex of the victims emerged for the combined dependent variables,  $V = 0.01$ ,  $F(1, 643) = 3.13$ ,  $p = .044$ . However, separate univariate ANOVAs on the outcome variables only revealed significant effect on belief score,  $F(1, 643) = 5.91$ ,  $p = .015$ ; and non-significant effect on victim blame  $F(1, 643) = .279$ ,  $p = ns$ . The mean score of the female vignette was significantly higher than the mean score of the male vignette ( $p < .001$ ), which indicated that the participants are more likely to believe in the vignette if the main character is a female. The interaction between sex of participant and sex of victim in survey was significant,  $F(1, 643) = 5.43$ ,  $p = .020$ . The results suggested that the American sample are more likely to believe in a male vignette, while Vietnamese sample are more likely to believe in a female vignette.

Table 2

*Descriptive statistic of mean HTMS score, belief score, and victim blaming score*

	nationality	Condition	Mean	Std. Deviation	N
This situation is believable.	US	Female	5.73	.638	162
		Male	5.74	.781	160
		Total	5.74	.712	322
	VN	Female	4.71	1.396	157
		Male	4.27	1.607	168
		Total	4.49	1.523	325
	Total	Female	5.23	1.193	319
		Male	4.99	1.467	328
		Total	5.11	1.344	647
The 13 year old is responsible for the situation.	US	Female	1.33	.772	162
		Male	1.30	.680	160
		Total	1.32	.727	322
	VN	Female	3.27	1.707	157
		Male	3.40	1.828	168
		Total	3.34	1.769	325
	Total	Female	2.29	1.634	319
		Male	2.37	1.743	328
		Total	2.33	1.689	647
HTMS_score	US	Female	2.1471	.56151	162
		Male	2.1097	.57001	160
		Total	2.1285	.56518	322
	VN	Female	3.2225	.72699	157
		Male	3.2336	.69298	168
		Total	3.2283	.70854	325
	Total	Female	2.6764	.84195	319
		Male	2.6854	.84841	328
		Total	2.6810	.84459	647

## **Discussion**

Study 2 found a significant effect of the nationality of participants on the participants' willingness to believe in trafficking situations and their tendency to blame the victims. There are mixed-findings on the effect of race on victim blaming (Lee et al., 2005), but the results indicated that Asians are more likely to be subject to rape myths (Lee et al., 2005). Thus, the results are consistent with some of the previous studies. Study 2 also confirmed the conclusion suggested by study 1 that human trafficking myth is a significant predictor of belief and victim blame. In addition, study 2 found a significant interaction between the nationality of the participants and the sex of the victims, which suggested that American is more likely to believe in a male vignette, and Vietnamese are more like to believe a female vignette.

## **Limitation and Future Research**

The results of the study might be affected by several confounding factors. In study 1, the participants were recruited through convenience which might contribute to the high proportion of young people (18-34 years old). Younger generations received different education and are raised in a different environment that they might contribute a distinctive mindset and level of sympathy than the previous generations. Additionally, the human trafficking myth scale is comprised of 17 items that reflect the human trafficking myths in the United States. A pilot study is suggested to determine cultural significance. Even though the survey was modified according to the culture and translated into Vietnamese, it might not be able to measure the level of myth adherence of the Vietnam public accurately. Future researchers should conduct an original study on prostitution myths in Vietnam and use the results to test the reliability and validity of the



human trafficking scale. This study only tested the effect of the victims and participants' sexes on human trafficking myth score, belief score, and victim blaming score. Victim blaming is a complicated issue that needs to be studied from various aspects. Future researchers may collect more demographic information including the level of education, social, economic status, or personal experience with trafficking.

Secondary data is a significant limitation of study 2. The researcher did not have control over the secondary sample. There was an inadequate presence of the male sample. In addition, the participants of the secondary data are online students of Liberty University. Taking the overly religious nature of the university, the participants' values and worldview might have influenced their responses. Thus, future researchers can replicate this study with different populations in order to increase the validity of the results.

### **Future Implication**

Regardless of the limitations, this study provides information for foundation in future studies. As mentioned, there is a lack of cultural research on human trafficking; hence, the present study will contribute to the Vietnamese research literature. According to Mrs. Le, manager of Blue Dragon Organization, there is not much psychological research on human sex trafficking in the database. Thus, this study can help build a firm foundation for future researchers to expand. Besides, the lack of data can prevent the law enforcers from developing effective anti-trafficking programs and trainings.

Consequently, this study can raise awareness and decrease myth adherence the myths acceptance influencing the law enforcer's attitude towards the victim and the offenders. It would also be an informative, educational resource to train judges and

police officers to be more sensitive to the trafficking situation, improve their ability to identify the victims, and improve their sympathy levels. Similarly, social workers should be required to have a comprehensive knowledge on human sex trafficking so that when they provide immediate care for the victims, they can respond accordingly to the needs and emotions of the individuals. Besides the staff who works closely with the victims, the general public should also have awareness of the issue so that they can assist the law enforcers in identifying trafficking and rescuing the individuals promptly. Even if people are not able to recognize trafficking, they should be more open-minded and reduce their stereotypes about prostitution and the people who are involved in sex work. If the law enforcers, social workers, and society do not show enough sympathy, they would not be able to encourage the victims to report their situations and creating a new life for themselves. Moreover, the decrease in stigmatization will reduce the risk of worsening their mental health conditions. Thus, this study is helpful for raising awareness of human trafficking, encouraging improvement in training and educational programs, and motivating people to advocate for the benefits of the trafficked individuals.

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## Appendix A

**Human Trafficking Myths Scale (modified)**

Please rate these statements on a scale of 1 to 6, where:

1 = definitely false

2 = mostly false

3 = probably false

4 = probably true

5 = mostly true

6 = definitely true

1. Human trafficking is another term for smuggling.
2. Human trafficking must include elements of physical force, restraint, bondage, and/or violence.
3. Human trafficking does not happen in Vietnam.
4. If someone did not want to be trafficked, he or she would leave the situation.
5. Vietnamese citizens are trafficked in their own country.
6. Human trafficking victims will seek help as soon as they have the opportunity.
7. People trafficked to other countries are always illegal immigrants.
8. Normal-appearing, well-educated, middle-class people are not trafficked.
9. Human trafficking victims will tell authorities they are being trafficked as soon as they have the opportunity.
10. Human trafficking must involve some form of travel, transportation, or movement across state or national borders.

11. If persons are trafficked in Vietnam, they are always from poor, uneducated communities.
12. If a child solicits sex from an adult in exchange for money, food, or shelter, he or she is not a victim.
13. Human trafficking is always controlled by organized crime
14. A person who is trafficked will always feel negatively toward the person(s) trafficking him or her.
15. If a person receives any kind of payment for sex, he or she is not being trafficked.
16. Human trafficking only occurs in undeveloped countries.



## Appendix B

**Sex Trafficking Vignette**

At 13 years of age, Huong/Hung ran away from home to get away from an abusive father. Within a couple of days, Huong/Hung was befriended by a man/woman who said he/she would take care of Huong/Hung. She/he had sex with him/her in exchange for shelter, food, and clothing. The man/woman said he would keep Huong/Hung safe, but soon he/she began to make Huong/Hung do sexual acts with other people for money.

Please rate these statements on a scale of 1 to 6, where:

1 = definitely false

2 = mostly false

3 = probably false

4 = probably true

5 = mostly true

6 = definitely true

1. This situation is believable
2. Huong/Hung is responsible for the situation