

Beyond the Headlines: Investigating Media Framing

of Malaysian Human Trafficking in Southeast Asia During Covid-19

Muhammad Asim Imran⁺ (Pakistan); Kah Choon Ng⁺⁺ & Cheng Kin Meng³ (Malaysia)

Abstract

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of human trafficking involving Malaysians in Southeast Asia, with a particular focus on Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. Employing a systematic review approach based on the PRISMA methodology, the study examines 63 news records from The Star, covering the period from March to September 2022. The findings reveal a notable increase in media coverage during this time, signaling heightened awareness of Malaysian human trafficking issues. The COVID-19 pandemic emerges as a critical factor exacerbating vulnerabilities and contributing to a surge in trafficking incidents. Malaysians were identified as victims of forced labor in diverse industries, including online scams and illegal gambling. The study highlights the significant role played by human trafficking networks and unscrupulous employers in trapping individuals in exploitative situations. The study underscores the urgency of strengthening legal frameworks, enhancing law enforcement, and fostering international collaboration to address challenges of human trafficking in Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *Human trafficking, Malaysians, PRISMA, Southeast Asia, Media Framing, The Star New Straits Times (NST)*

- ⁺ Muhammad Asim Imran, Asst. Prof., Dept. of Mass Communication, School of Social Sciences and Humanities, National University of Sciences & Technology, Pakistan. email: asimimran@s3h.nust.edu.pk & masimimran@gmail.com.
- ⁺⁺ Kah Choon Ng, Research Scholar, University of Malaya, Malaysia. email: kahchoon.15@gmail.com.
- ³ Cheng Kin Meng, Assistant Professor, Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman (Sg. Long Campus), Malaysia. email: chengkm@utar.edu.my.

Introduction

Human trafficking stands as a deeply entrenched and urgent concern in Southeast Asia, with countries like Cambodia, Myanmar, and Thailand emerging as focal points of this distressing issue. Extensive research, including reports from the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) (Perry and McEwing, 2013), underscores Southeast Asia's role as a significant source, transit, and destination for human trafficking, affecting both sex and labor trafficking, with women and children disproportionately bearing the brunt of this exploitation (UNODC, n.d.). In particular, this severe violation of human rights encompasses various forms such as forced labor, sexual exploitation, and organ trafficking (Stanescu and Tasente, 2023). Beyond the regional context, human trafficking is a global issue affecting individuals regardless of demographics, perpetuated by coercion, manipulation, and power imbalances. Solntsev and Popovic (2023) argue that human trafficking represents a modern form of slavery affecting all states, thereby highlighting the seriousness of the problem for the international community in particular, Cambodia, Myanmar and Thailand.

At the national level, Cambodia grapples with an exceptionally severe human trafficking crisis. Research from the United States Department of State illuminates Cambodia's status as a primary destination country within Southeast Asia, serving as a hub for both the supply and transit of trafficking victims. Moreover, this vulnerability is exacerbated by high levels of poverty and limited access to education and viable employment opportunities (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Similarly, in Myanmar, a recent news report reveals the plight of over 300 Malaysian nationals trapped as victims of human trafficking syndicates in the country (Arifin, 2023). Specifically, due to the unstable political situation in Myanmar, these individuals are trapped and awaiting transfer to the syndicates' relocated operational hub situated on the outskirts of Tonpheung, proximate to Laos within the Golden Triangle region. Azirul Syafiq Sazali, an activist from the Malaysia International Humanitarian Organization (MHO), corroborated this shift in operations based on his involvement in various rescue missions targeting human trafficking victims across Myanmar and Laos (Arifin, 2023).

Shifting our focus to Thailand, recent data from the International Organization for Migration (IOM) highlights a concerning trend. From 2022 to June 2023, a total of more than 230 people from 19 different nationalities were reported regarding instances of coerced involvement in criminal activities. Notably, among these individuals, 86 percent were recognized as victims of trafficking. However, it is probable that the true number of victims exceeds the reported figures, as access to and availability of comprehensive data on such fraudulent establishments remain limited (Chaikaew, 2023).

Taken together, the ramifications of human trafficking are profound and enduring, constituting a grave violation of human rights in these Indo-China countries. Victims endure not only physical but also psychological and emotional trauma. Furthermore, beyond the individual level, society bears a significant economic and social burden as a result of this criminal enterprise. Thus, there is an urgent imperative for coordinated efforts aimed at eradicating human trafficking and providing comprehensive support for survivors. In recent years, the scourge of human trafficking has escalated both regionally and globally, constituting a contemporary form of slavery (Russell, 2018). The emergence of this crisis has been notably exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, as evidenced by the research of

Todres and Diaz (2021). As a result, the issue transcends the purview of Southeast Asian governments, implicating transnational criminal networks that systematically exploit human dignity and rights through reprehensible treatment.

The advancement in communication technology and transportation has significantly altered the landscape of Southeast Asia, blurring the once rigid lines of national borders. This shift has facilitated a greater movement of goods and people across the region, with Malaysians increasingly seeking employment opportunities in neighboring countries. In part, the catalyst for this migration can be traced, in part, to the economic downturn triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic (Karim et al., 2020). However, amidst this increased mobility, there lies a concerning issue: human trafficking. Despite the interconnectedness fostered by modern technology, there exists a critical gap in the dissemination of information regarding this illicit trade. Recent content analyses of online news and social media have revealed shortcomings in reporting, with many narratives failing to address the root causes and preventive measures of human trafficking (Tsai et al., 2021a, 2021b). Such gaps impede the efforts of authorities and researchers to develop comprehensive solutions to combat this pervasive problem.

Given these challenges, at the heart of the matter is the need for heightened public awareness, which serves as a pivotal factor in preventing human trafficking within the region (Dinh et al., 2021). Nevertheless, there remains a notable research gap, particularly concerning the trafficking of Malaysians during the Covid-19 outbreak, necessitating a rigorous examination of news coverage related to human trafficking and forced labor specifically in Malaysia. By conducting a comprehensive analysis of news content, the article delves into the primary reasons why scam victims are coerced into forced labor, while also outlining the harrowing experiences they endure.

This study aims to investigate how the Covid-19 pandemic has affected the trafficking of Malaysians in the Mekong region and the implications it carries for intervention strategies and victim support. Importantly, the objective extends beyond informing Southeast Asians; it also aims to alert potential victims worldwide to the dangers of such scams, thereby mitigating the risk of exploitation and abuse. Through the application of media analysis, this research endeavors to provide a thorough overview of human trafficking and forced labor involving Malaysians in Southeast Asian countries.

Literature Review

Human trafficking from Malaysia to Cambodia, Thailand and Myanmar

In Southeast Asia, the issue of human trafficking looms large, with Malaysia at its epicenter, serving as both a source and destination country for this illicit trade. Within Malaysian borders, migrant workers and vulnerable individuals, particularly women and children from neighboring nations, endure exploitation, exacerbated by instances of organ trafficking (Wan et al., 2017). In 2021, Malaysia faced a concerning trend: a significant number of its citizens travelled to the Great Mekong Region in search of employment with fictitious companies. These individuals were lured by promises of high wages promoted by agents on social media or by acquaintances involved in local phone scam operations. As a result, some fell victim to scams orchestrated by trusted individuals who promised employment benefits and accommodation, only to find themselves ensnared in fraudulent schemes.

Recognizing the clandestine nature of human trafficking operations, obtaining accurate statistics poses a significant challenge (Von Feigenblatt, 2021), thereby highlighting the urgent need for more comprehensive research efforts. In response to these challenges, various measures have been enacted to safeguard state stability and security, including immigration restrictions. However, conventional migration patterns have inadvertently facilitated the establishment of illicit migration networks by transnational criminal organizations (Farrell et al., 2019). Consequently, these groups exploit the economic, social, cultural, and psychological vulnerabilities of marginalized populations (Armitage and Nellums, 2020), leading to emerging security concerns such as human trafficking and forced labor, which transcend national borders and constitute transnational crimes.

Against this backdrop, research examining human trafficking from Malaysia to Cambodia has unearthed pivotal insights. Takamatsu's seminal work (2004) employs a case study approach, synthesizing government reports, media accounts, and expert interviews. This comprehensive analysis establishes Malaysia as a major source and destination for human trafficking and smuggling cases, with Cambodia chiefly serving as a destination (Larsen, 2010). Crucial factors like poverty, limited educational and employment opportunities, and lax law enforcement mechanisms emerge as central contributors to this complex issue.

Similarly, Gozdiak's study (2011) parallels this narrative, offering a meticulous examination of the trafficking route from Malaysia to Cambodia. Echoing Takamatsu's findings, this research reaffirms Malaysia's dual role and underscores Cambodia's significance as a destination. Poverty, limited opportunities, and weak law enforcement emerge as pivotal factors contributing to the perpetuation of this issue (Adesina, 2014). Building on the foundations laid by Cheah (2006), researchers delve deeper into the push and pull dynamics shaping human trafficking from Malaysia to Cambodia. By employing a mix of qualitative and quantitative methodologies, including expert interviews and data analysis, they identify poverty, lack of education and job prospects, and socio-cultural factors as primary push factors. Simultaneously, demand for cheap labor and inadequate law enforcement emerge as key pull factors (Yagci Sokat and Altay, 2022).

Extending the geographical scope, Marks and Olsen's comprehensive study (2015) further extends the exploration to encompass human trafficking from Malaysia to Myanmar and Thailand. Drawing from diverse sources, including government reports, media coverage, and expert insights, this research underscores Malaysia's pivotal role and emphasizes Thailand's emergence as a major destination. Consistent with earlier studies, poverty, educational and employment deficits, and weak law enforcement surface as significant contributors (Qiu et al., 2019). More broadly, a wider perspective on human trafficking from Malaysia to Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar highlights the complex and intertwined nature of this pervasive issue. Lim et al.'s comprehensive study (2018) underscores Malaysia's dual role, shedding light on the vulnerabilities faced by migrant workers. In particular, these vulnerabilities -- rooted in deceptive recruitment, unpaid wages, and deplorable working conditions, make them susceptible to human trafficking networks, further exacerbating the issue.

Beyond migration-focused studies, Greenbaum and Okech's research (2018) emphasizes the role of supply chains in perpetuating human trafficking, particularly in Southeast Asia. Their work uncovers how multinational corporations inadvertently contribute to forced

labor and trafficking, underscoring the urgent need for greater corporate responsibility and accountability. In addition, Smith et al.'s analysis (2017) delves into the impact of government policies on human trafficking trends in the region. Their findings reveal that shifts in immigration policies can either exacerbate or mitigate trafficking risks, highlighting the delicate balance that must be struck. Furthermore, Lee and Choi's exploration (2016) of civil society organizations (CSOs) underscores their significant contributions to the fight against human trafficking in Southeast Asia. Their study highlights the invaluable support provided to victims by CSOs and emphasizes the necessity for collaborative efforts between governments, CSOs, and international agencies to formulate effective anti-trafficking strategies. Likewise, Williams' investigation (2019) into the intricate connections between human trafficking and transnational organized crime illuminates how criminal networks operate seamlessly across borders, exploiting vulnerabilities in source, transit, and destination countries. Understanding the modus operandi of these networks is pivotal in developing comprehensive strategies to combat human trafficking.

In the digital age, technology assumes a prominent role in the trafficking landscape. Smith and Naim's research (2019) delves into the ways traffickers utilize online platforms and social media to lure victims and coordinate illicit activities. Therefore, recognizing the influence of technology is critical in efforts to counter human trafficking effectively. In sum, these studies collectively provide a comprehensive and interconnected understanding of human trafficking from Malaysia to Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. They highlight the urgency for a multifaceted approach, addressing the vulnerabilities of migrant workers, the role of supply chains, the impact of government policies, the contributions of civil society organizations, the dynamics of transnational organized crime, and the influence of technology in combating this complex challenge. In light of these findings, this research aims to provide a thorough overview on human trafficking and forced labors of Malaysians in these Southeast Asian countries by using media analysis. Specifically, the study explores how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the trafficking of Malaysians in the Mekong region, and what are the implications for intervention strategies and victim support?

Methods

This section establishes the systematic technique utilized in this study to examine the content of news items pertaining to human trafficking in Southeast Asia amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. To achieve this objective, the research technique employed in this study is founded upon the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) approach, which provides a structured approach to reporting systematic reviews, guaranteeing a thorough and well-documented selection process (Beller et al., 2013; Batista et al., 2021; Domi et al., 2021, and Vilar-Compte et al., 2021; Takkouche and Norman, 2011). The objective of this systematic review is to thoroughly examine contemporary advancements in the field of human trafficking, with a specific emphasis on individuals from Malaysia residing in Southeast Asia. Additionally, this review seeks to evaluate the repercussions of the COVID-19 epidemic on the phenomenon of human trafficking in this region.

The process of selecting news content units for this content analysis strictly complies to well stated criteria for inclusion and exclusion (Page, 2021). Accordingly, the parameters for inclusion and exclusion in this review are delineated as follows:

Inclusion Criteria

First, this study focuses on examining the experiences of the Malaysian community in relation to human trafficking in Southeast Asia during the Covid-19 outbreak. To provide a comprehensive perspective, the analysis encompasses a range of study types, including peer-reviewed scholarly publications, empirical investigations, case studies, qualitative and quantitative research, systematic literature reviews, and reports from reputable sources such as government agencies, international organizations, and established research institutes. Second, the chosen publications encompass the time span from 2019 to the current date, or a period directly pertinent to the Covid-19 epidemic. This time frame is chosen because an analysis of how the research provide insights into the effects of the pandemic on human trafficking. Third, the study concentrates on the issue of human trafficking in Southeast Asian nations, namely Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar.

Furthermore, English-language publications were largely chosen for distribution because of the extensive English proficiency among the Malaysian populace (Ahmad and Lateh, 2016). The purpose of this decision is to enhance the accessibility of the study for its intended audience.

The study's focus is on the distinct effects of the Covid-19 epidemic on the dynamics of human trafficking. In this regards, the task entails examining alterations in the transportation of commodities, people, and resources, together with the vulnerabilities and precautionary measures that have arisen in reaction to the worldwide health emergency. Figure 1 presents the specific criteria that were used to determine which papers were included in the review.

<i>Inclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Demographic</i>	Malaysian population involved or encountered with human trafficking in Southeast Asia during the Covid-19 pandemic
<i>Type of study</i>	Peer-reviewed scholarly publications, empirical investigations, case studies, qualitative and quantitative research endeavors, systematic literature reviews, and reports from reputable entities (government agencies, international organizations, and well-established research institutes)
<i>Temporal scope</i>	2019 to the present or a time frame directly relevant to the Covid-19 pandemic
<i>Geographic scope</i>	Southeast Asian countries, specifically Malaysia, Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, and other relevant nations in the region
<i>Language</i>	English
<i>Topic</i>	Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on human trafficking dynamics (changes in movement of goods, individuals, and resources, as well as susceptibilities and countermeasures)

Figure 1. Inclusion criteria of the study.

Exclusion Criteria

This section shows the preset elements or traits that are utilized to disqualify persons or subjects from engaging in a study or analysis. The focus of this study mostly centers on non-Malaysian populations, unless there exists a direct correlation to the impact of Covid-19 on the occurrence of human trafficking involving individuals from Malaysia throughout the Southeast Asian region.

The requirements for publication types explicitly exclude sources that do not undergo peer review, such as opinion pieces, editorials, news items, and non-academic blogs, unless they provide unique insights or data that possess academic or scientific significance.

Non-scholarly sources encompass any sources that lack the necessary academic or scientific legitimacy in relation to the information they provide.

Irrelevant Studies: Articles that do not possess direct relevance to the understanding of human trafficking or the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as those that are not related to the given geographical context. The selection criteria for the research included in this analysis are restricted to publications that have been published subsequent to 2019, unless they incorporate essential historical context or foundational information that is relevant to the topic under consideration. The inclusion of this criterion serves to eliminate duplicate sources that exhibit duplicated research findings or employ identical datasets.

Research on Languages Other Than English: Despite the widespread usage of English as a commonly spoken language in Malaysia, it is reasonable to use non-English sources into academic inquiries, as long as they give substantial and unique data. However, it is crucial that these sources are well justified prior to their inclusion.

The current investigation centers on the examination of news stories sourced from The Star, a renowned English daily in Malaysia. Despite its limits and inherent biases, The Star is nevertheless a viable option as a news source for information on human trafficking for various reasons. The Star, as a highly regarded Malaysian media, offers significant perspectives on the local nuances of human trafficking, particularly Malaysia's position as a destination nation. Although there may be inherent patriotic biases, The Star's coverage provides a comprehensive and sophisticated grasp of human trafficking concerns in Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Moreover, The Star's being in Malaysia could provide a distinctive viewpoint on narratives about human trafficking, namely those that involve Malaysians as victims in foreign countries. By focusing on the local context, we can gain insight into the difficulties experienced by victims and the measures taken by authorities to tackle trafficking problems.

Although The Star's reporting may be influenced by government pressure, it also presents an opportunity to examine the intricate aspects of human trafficking, such as suspected instances of corruption or collusion inside the government. The Star's adeptness in navi-

gating these hurdles and delivering impartial coverage enhances the credibility of its reporting. In addition, The Star's coverage of human trafficking, despite the risks faced by journalists, displays its dedication to increasing public knowledge and ensuring that those responsible are held responsible. Despite the inherent dangers, The Star persists in covering human trafficking cases, emphasizing the courage of its journalists in addressing delicate and perilous subjects. Despite The Star's relatively modest resources in comparison to international news organizations, its local presence enables it to provide comprehensive coverage of human trafficking concerns that are unique to Malaysia and Southeast Asia. Although conducting extensive investigations can be difficult, The Star's research continues to provide significant insights into the intricate dynamics of human trafficking in the region.

Comparison of two main news source from Malaysia

Although both The Star and New Straits Times address the issue of human trafficking in Malaysia, they choose distinct approaches. As shown in Table 2, The Star frequently covers a wide range of human trafficking issues and typically includes the viewpoints of survivors in its reporting. The language employed in The Star's articles is typically more comprehensible, suggesting a deliberate attempt to involve a broader readership. In contrast, The New Straits Times (NST) prioritizes in-depth investigative journalism pertaining to individual instances of trafficking and governmental initiatives. Although this strategy may provide valuable information about official responses, it occasionally utilizes more specialized terminology. The Star's collaborations with anti-trafficking non-governmental organizations (NGOs) could offer an edge in terms of having a wider range of stories and more comprehensive coverage (Siti Hajar et al., 2010; Suppiah et al., 2019).

Criteria	<i>The Star</i>	<i>New Straits Times (NST)</i>
Focus of Coverage	Broad range of human trafficking types (labor, sex, etc.)	Leans towards investigative reports on specific cases or government actions.
Investigative Depth	Varies, can include in-depth pieces	Often focuses on initial reporting of incidents, with less follow-up.
Survivor Voices	Makes a conscious effort to include survivor stories.	Less emphasis on survivor narratives, focuses on official pronouncements.
Language	More accessible, caters to a general audience.	Can be more technical or bureaucratic in tone.
Solutions-Oriented	Sometimes includes discussions on policy changes or NGO efforts.	Lacks focus on solutions or preventative measures.
Partnerships	Known to collaborate with some anti-trafficking NGOs.	Unclear if they have established partnerships with anti-trafficking NGOs.

Figure 2. A comparison based on The Star and NST coverage of human trafficking and news delivery in Malaysia (Siti Hajar et al, 2010; Suppiah et al, 2019).

<i>Exclusion Criteria</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Demographic</i>	Non-Malaysian populations, unless there exists a direct correlation to the impact of Covid-19 on the occurrence of human trafficking involving individuals from Malaysia throughout the Southeast Asian region
<i>Publication type</i>	Non-peer-reviewed sources, such as opinion pieces, editorials, news items, and non-academic blogs, unless they provide unique insights or data that possess academic or scientific significance.
<i>Scholarly legitimacy</i>	Non-scholarly sources, such as any sources that lack the necessary academic or scientific legitimacy in relation to the information they provide.
<i>Relevance</i>	Irrelevant studies, such as articles that do not possess direct relevance to the understanding of human trafficking or the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic, as well as those that are not related to the given geographical context.
<i>Temporal scope</i>	Publications that have been published prior to 2019, unless they incorporate essential historical context or foundational information that is relevant to the topic under consideration.
<i>Duplication</i>	Duplicate sources that exhibit duplicated research findings or employ identical datasets.

Figure 3. Exclusion criteria of the study.

The specific subject of interest is the issue of human trafficking in Southeast Asia, with a particular emphasis on Myanmar, Cambodia, and Thailand (Hoon, 2022; Tsai et al., 2021). The study employed a combination of search phrases, such as "human trafficking" and "Southeast Asia," together with specific country names to gather pertinent news data. It is crucial to mention that the records were selectively refined to omit commentary and articles that did not primarily focus on human trafficking. The United Kingdom Modern Slavery Act of 2015 offers a thorough explanation of modern slavery, which includes human trafficking, coerced labour, and various other types of worker abuse. The legal framework mentioned in this study, as discussed by Farrell and Fahy (2009), is an important resource for comprehending the extent and consequences of human trafficking.

The data gathering process includes using the Google search engine to retrieve news stories published by The Star over the period from March to September 2022. The study explicitly examined the headlines, sub-headlines, and the first three paragraphs of online news stories to assess their suitability for inclusion in the content analysis (Farrell and Fahy, 2009).

It is crucial to recognize that the news articles obtained by Google News are accessible to the public and can be accessed by all users without any cost. Therefore, it is presumed that consent has been given for the utilization of these items in the current investigation. In addition, the data gathering procedure followed the ethical guidelines of qualitative research, guaranteeing that the principles of research ethics were maintained throughout the study

(Farrell and Fahy, 2009). Overall, the study performed a thorough examination of news articles from The Star, utilizing a methodical approach to gathering and analyzing data in compliance with recognized ethical standards. The study aims to offer significant insights into how human trafficking concerns are portrayed and covered in Southeast Asia, specifically within the Malaysian media setting (Farrell and Fahy, 2009).

Following with the procedural of data gathering was carried out in accordance with the PRISMA methodology.

As show in Figure 4, a total of 132 news recordings pertaining to human trafficking issues in Southeast Asia were identified during the initial phase of the study. The data was additionally refined to eliminate commentary, and individuals involved in human trafficking were not the primary focus of the research. The research was carried out utilizing the online search engine Google, namely within the news area. The parameters of the setting were configured to exclusively display the news articles produced by The Star newspaper throughout the period spanning from March to September 2022. The inclusion of online news articles in the content analysis was determined based on the examination of their headlines, sub-headlines, and the initial three paragraphs. The information available on Google News is openly accessible to the general public without any cost, thus implying that consent is presumed in the current research. The data collection process employed in this study adhered to the ethical principles commonly observed in qualitative research.

The findings are organized based on categorization by date, title, description, and source. The dataset was carefully curated to eliminate duplicate records, resulting in a final dataset of 63 distinct news records. The dataset consisting of 63 records was subjected to a comprehensive screening procedure in order to evaluate their pertinence and congruity with the research objectives. The articles underwent evaluation based on predetermined criteria for inclusion and disqualification. During the screening stage, 69 records were excluded due to their lack of relevance or direct focus on human trafficking issues in Southeast Asia. The total number of full-text articles that were evaluated for eligibility in this study was 63. After the screening process, a total of 63 records were identified as relevant and were further evaluated to determine their eligibility for inclusion in the content analysis, based on predefined criteria.

The total count of full-text articles that were excluded from the study is zero, and this exclusion was based on specific reasons. All 63 full-text papers were deemed pertinent to the research objectives, resulting in none being excluded.

The qualitative synthesis contained a total of 63 studies, encompassing all of them. This comprehensive approach aimed to extract valuable insights from the news content units. The quantitative synthesis, often known as a meta-analysis, did not include any studies (N=0). Our investigation focused primarily on a qualitative synthesis of news material, and did not include any quantitative synthesis or meta-analysis.

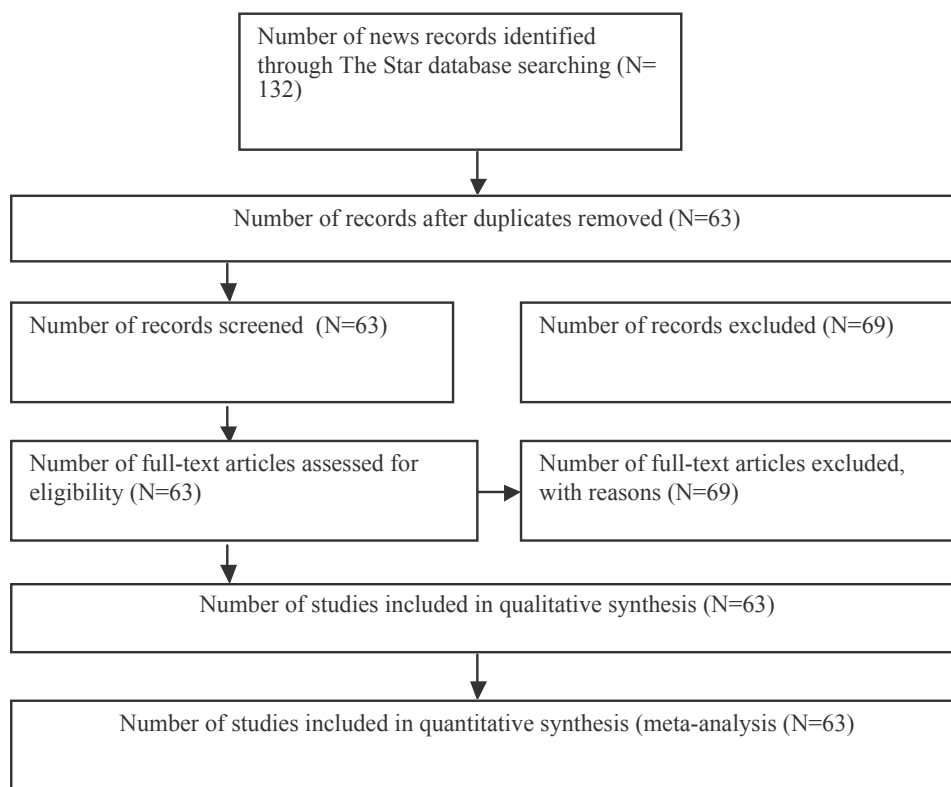


Figure 4. PRISMA flow diagram of Malaysian in Southeast Asia during Covid-19 (Liberati et al, 2009).

Findings

This study unravels the complexities surrounding human trafficking in the region, utilizing news content analysis to provide insights into the current situation. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the surge in human trafficking of Malaysians in Southeast Asia is attributed to heightened vulnerability among individuals and weakened border controls in the region. The pandemic has exacerbated socio-economic challenges, leaving many susceptible to exploitation. Additionally, disruptions in law enforcement and border security have created opportunities for traffickers. This alarming trend underscores the urgent need for targeted interventions to address vulnerabilities, enhance border management, and mitigate the impact of the pandemic on human trafficking in Southeast Asia (Ha Jin and Dhaneswara, 2023).

The pandemic has amplified instability, leading to a significant increase in human trafficking incidents (Aslam, 2022). The utilization of the internet as a tool for exploitation has further complicated the situation, with online information becoming a method for trafficking (Buckley et al., 2022). Moreover, the elevated unemployment rate during the pandemic has added to the rise in trafficking cases, increasing individuals' susceptibility to exploitation (Meri et al., 2022).

Beyond these structural factors human trafficking networks and brokers play a major role in facilitating these scams and forced labor situations. They profit from the recruitment and exploitation of vulnerable individuals. These networks often operate across borders, making it challenging for authorities to track and apprehend those responsible. Vulnerabil-

ities to trafficking among Malaysians include economic hardship, unemployment, lack of education, and the presence of marginalized communities (Srinivas and Sivaraman, 2021). Moreover, limited awareness and information among potential victims about the risks associated with overseas employment can make them easy targets for scams (Button et al., 2014). These scams may be orchestrated by organized criminal networks with connections in both Malaysia and Myanmar, making it challenging for law enforcement agencies to track and dismantle these operations. Both the Cambodian and Malaysian governments, in collaboration with international organizations and NGOs, have taken steps to address these issues. Efforts include awareness campaigns, improved regulation of recruitment agencies, and measures to identify and assist victims. Law enforcement agencies in both countries have worked together to dismantle human trafficking networks and bring perpetrators to justice. It is worth noting here that from March to September 2022, the number of news items reported in *The Star* increased from three to seventeen. This demonstrates that the media is becoming more aware of the significance of Malaysian human trafficking in the study areas as presented in Figure 5.

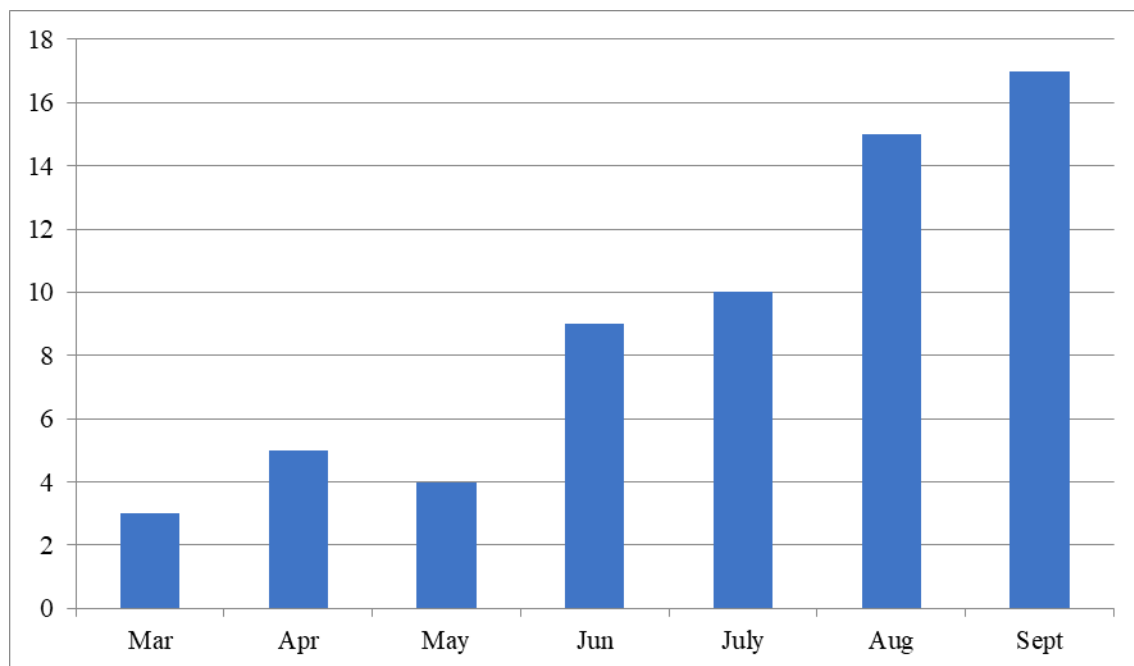


Figure 5. Total news content units from March to September 2022 in *The Star*.

The main locations where victims are trafficked into gambling and phone scam operations in Southeast Asia are illustrated in Figure 6, highlighting Lashio, Mae Sot, and Sihanoukville. Lashio is a small town located in northern Myanmar near the China-Myanmar border; it also borders east India (Ng, 2021). Mae Sot-Myawaddy is indeed a small town located on the border between Thailand and Myanmar, and it has gained notoriety as an area associated with human trafficking and forced labor. KK Park, also known as Kyaw Khaing Park, is one of the areas in this region that has been cited in connection with such illicit activities. Mae Sot in Thailand and Myawaddy in Myanmar are located on a porous and relatively uncontrolled border (Arnold and Hewison, 2005). This geographic proximity and the ease of crossing the border make it conducive for illegal activities, including human trafficking. In Cambodia, Sihanoukville is a touristy coastal town in the southern part

of the country (Jackie Ong and Smith, 2014). Since 2018, it has been a part of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to develop the tourism and casino industries as the Sihanoukville Special Economic Zone in this region (Wang et al., 2021).

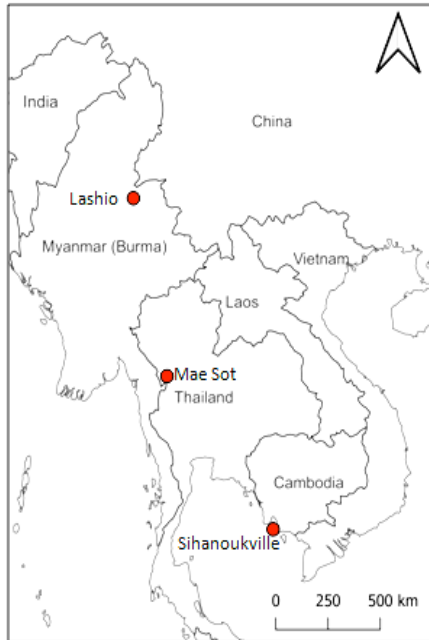


Figure 6. The primary locations of victims trafficked in the gambling and phone scam industries in Southeast Asia.

Myanmar

Myanmar has been under scrutiny for human rights abuses, and various international organizations and governments have called for investigations and accountability (Arifin, 2022). The situation is complex, and efforts to address these issues involve a combination of domestic and international actions, including diplomatic pressure, sanctions, and support for local organizations working to protect human rights (Günes et al., 2022).

KK Park in Myanmar is well known for human trafficking and forced laboring. It was formed by the now arrested Chinese She Zhijiang, who has acquired a Cambodian passport and changed his name to “Tang Kriang Kai.” Before being caught in Thailand, he was wanted by both China and the international community. He was involved in the illegal gambling and lottery sector, where he deceived and made large sums of money (Strangio, 2020).

In the southern Myanmar, according to information from a rescued Malaysian who only wanted to be known as Seah, he reported that the syndicate was enslaving over 1,000 Malaysians simply in the building where he was being held in Myawaddy. “There were roughly 300 individuals on each floor, predominantly Malaysians. They were also beaten; therefore, I know they are victims” he added at a press conference on June 8 at Wisma MCA.” (Adam, 2022). The exploitation of victims is consistent in the International Labor Organization (ILO) (Lerche, 2007), including of restriction of movement, isolation, physical and sexual violence, retention of identity documents, excessive overtime and abusive working and living conditions.

Thailand

The economic disparities between Thailand and Myanmar drive many people to seek employment opportunities in Thailand, often without legal documentation (Chan, 2022). This

vulnerability to exploitation is exploited by human traffickers. Historically, the region has faced challenges related to the enforcement of labor laws and regulations. Weak regulation and oversight can create an environment where exploitative labor practices can thrive. Organized criminal networks involved in human trafficking often operate in border areas, taking advantage of weak border control and limited law enforcement cooperation between the two countries.

Traffickers and unscrupulous employers may confiscate the identification documents of workers, effectively trapping them and limiting their ability to escape exploitative conditions. For example, a student named Goi was about to graduate as a teacher but the 23-year-old went to Bangkok in January 2022 to meet a “girlfriend” he had only contacted online, trafficked into Myawaddy in south-eastern Myanmar and forced to work for the syndicate (The Star, 2022b). The family discovered Goh had died in May under a fake name in a Thai hospital in Mae Sot, the doctor believed Goh was abused before he was left for treatment on April 11, 2022. He was admitted to the hospital’s ICU unit under a fake name and passport number. Due to his son’s fake identity, he said the hospital could not reach the embassy and family to discuss his health condition and treatment. He passed away on May 11, 2022 at Mae Sot Hospital near the Thailand-Myanmar border. His remain was buried at a cemetery in Si Racha in Chonburi province, across the river from the Myanmar complex. He was hospitalized in intensive care for a month and his cause of death was reported to be infection in his heart and lungs. He made his first – and last – call to his parents in March saying he had been beaten up for allegedly faking illness and needed RM80,000 so he could be hospitalized (The Star, 2022).

Following a tip-off by another Malaysian victim who had returned to the country, it was learnt that Goi was taken to KK Garden in the Myawaddy township near the Thai border to work for companies engaged in online scams. Goh was cremated on Thursday at the Hin Kong Temple in Si Racha, about 120km southeast of Bangkok, and his ashes brought back to Ipoh (The Star, 2022a). The parents were informed by a non-governmental organization that arranged his son’s burial services in May to settle the outstanding hospital bills of about RM40,000 before the family could obtain a death certificate to exhume the body for DNA testing and cremation (Zainal, 2022).

Cambodia

Sihanoukville has undergone rapid economic development and urbanization, driven by tourism, real estate, and the construction of a major deep-sea port. The demand for labor in these sectors has attracted a large number of foreign workers, particularly from countries like China (Po and Heng, 2019). Sihanoukville, a coastal town in Cambodia, has faced significant challenges related to issues like forced labor, particularly in the context of its rapid development and the influx of foreign workers in industries such as construction, hospitality, and entertainment (Wang et al., 2021). This coastal town is known for its rapid transformation into a major destination for casino gambling and entertainment. In recent years, Sihanoukville has become a hub for the casino industry, attracting both domestic and international visitors (Bo and Loughlin, 2022).

Previous research on human trafficking in Cambodia has primarily focused on women and children who work in sex industry to earn living (DoCarmo et al., 2021; Schmidthorst, 2022). However, according to the present news analysis, the human trafficking for forced labor

in phone scamming industry cases involving a mix population of Malaysian men, women, fresh graduates, and students under the age of 18. These individuals are desperate for better job prospects and are unwilling to be tricked or voluntarily join the forces in Southeast Asian countries, most of them were attracted by lucrative pay. As a result, additional in-depth study efforts are necessary to understand the statistics of the population engaged in these crimes during and after Covid-19.

These victims are made to work in illegal gambling and scam call centers, they also set with high key performance indicator and overly worked for long hours that stressed them out and if it was not achieved, they will get punished by getting beaten and electric shock (The Star, 2022b; AFP, 2022). They are forced to work for a scam call center (The Star, 2022a). At a shuttered Great Wall Park compound in the seaside city of Sihanoukville, Cambodian officials uncovered evidence of human trafficking, kidnapping, and torture during searches on suspected cybercrime compounds. These victims are made to work in illegal gambling and scam call centers (The Star, 2022b). These victims are relocated inside the Indo-China region; these scam centers are said to be run by a large fraud group of Chinese people.

Refusal to Return Back to Home Country

Even though the goal of all trafficked victims is to return to Malaysia, some returnees – due to financial hardships and familial pressure (Louw, 2020) – have refused to go back and have instead chosen to engage in the phone scamming industry. Factors contributing to the reluctance of human trafficking victims to return to their home country encompass the severe trauma and exploitation they endured, the fear instilled by traffickers, the social stigma attached to being a trafficking survivor, apprehension about re-victimization, a lack of trust in the criminal justice system, and insufficient support, treatment, and protection. These elements can impact victims' willingness or ability to engage in the investigation and prosecution of perpetrators. Furthermore, inadequacies or inefficiencies in legislation, governmental and criminal justice system corruption, and shortcomings in return programs can exacerbate these vulnerabilities, diminishing the likelihood of victims participating in legal proceedings (Andrevski et al., 2013; Jain, 2022).

Traffickers often confiscate victims' passports and identification documents, leaving them without legal documentation and effectively stranded in the host country. This limits their ability to leave and return home. Many victims of forced labor incur significant debts as a result of recruitment fees, transportation costs, and other expenses related to their employment. This debt bondage created a sense of obligation to stay and continue working, even in exploitative conditions, in the hope of repaying the debts (Louw, 2020).

Many victims are unaware of their rights and the available resources for assistance, which can keep them trapped in exploitative situations. Some victims may distrust law enforcement or government authorities in their home country due to previous negative experiences or corruption concerns. This distrust can dissuade them from seeking help. Victims of forced labor often experience severe trauma, depression, and other psychological effects as a result of their exploitation. These factors can impair their decision-making and their ability to take action.

Some Malaysians refused to be rescued or to leave Cambodia. Some of them fled their homes, while others fled from loan sharks. They don't always want to tell their parents the truth (Zahiid, 2022). "When the parents are at a crossroads for what to do, they fabricate stories about their children being abducted and forced to work, but when we arrived to

rescue them, they refused to return,” said Eldeen. However, Malaysian Ambassador to Cambodia Datuk Eldeen Husaini further stated that others had refused to return to Malaysia because they were runaways or victims sheltering from loan sharks (Zahiid, 2022).

Post-trafficking stigma refers to the negative attitudes, perceptions, and discrimination that survivors of human trafficking often face after escaping or being rescued from their traffickers. This stigma can manifest in various ways and can be a significant barrier to survivors' reintegration into society and their overall recovery. Survivors may be unfairly blamed for their victimization. They might be seen as willing participants in illegal activities or as having made poor choices (Laurie and Richardson, 2021).

Reasons for Falling into Job Scams

During the COVID-19 outbreak in 2020, economic hardships and limited job opportunities in Malaysia may drive individuals to seek employment abroad, including in Thailand and Myanmar. Desperation for employment can make them more vulnerable to deceptive recruitment practices (Larsen, 2010). Many potential victims may lack adequate information about the risks associated with overseas employment. They might not be aware of the common tactics used by human traffickers and scammers. Scammers and traffickers use false promises to manipulate victims, making it difficult for them to make informed decisions about their employment (Sykiotou, 2017).

Victims are often lured by fraudulent job offers that promise high wages and a better life (Gul et al., 2022). Scammers may contact Malaysians, often via phone calls or online advertisements, offering lucrative job offers in Myanmar. They may claim that the positions are well-paid and require no previous experience. These offers may come from recruitment agencies that are not properly regulated or licensed.

Malaysian nationals who travel to Cambodia for employment are sometimes lured into exploitative situations by unscrupulous recruiters or employers. Some Malaysians may be promised well-paying jobs but end up trapped in forced labor situations where they are subjected to long working hours, low wages, and inhumane conditions. Victims in foreign countries like Myanmar may have limited access to legal protections and may not be aware of their rights or how to seek help. Scammers and traffickers often use threats, intimidation, and psychological manipulation to control victims and keep them in exploitative situations (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023).

Some victims may have their passports confiscated upon arrival in Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar, making it difficult for them to escape exploitative situations (Denney and Xayamoungkhoun, 2023). Victims may be required to pay substantial fees for recruitment, visas, and travel costs. These fees can create a cycle of debt bondage, making it difficult for individuals to escape exploitative situations. Victims find themselves in exploitative working conditions, such as long working hours, low wages, lack of proper accommodation, and inadequate safety measures.

Conclusion

To conclude, this study offers a comprehensive exploration of the intricate dimensions surrounding human trafficking involving Malaysians in Southeast Asia, with a specific focus on Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. The COVID-19 pandemic has heightened vulnerabil-

ities, amplifying the exploitation of Malaysians, particularly in contexts like online scams and illegal gambling. The research underscores key contributing factors such as human trafficking networks, passport confiscation, debt bondage, and the enduring post-trafficking stigma, all of which impede victims' ability to break free from exploitative situations. The noteworthy increase in media coverage during the specified period underscores the growing acknowledgment of Malaysian human trafficking issues, signaling the urgency for intensified attention and collective actions.

The study reveals the multifaceted nature of trafficking, ranging from traditional forms of exploitation to emerging threats in the digital realm, such as phone scamming. The geographical proximity and porous borders in the region contribute to the ease of illegal activities, necessitating collaborative efforts between nations, NGOs, and international organizations to combat these issues effectively. Importantly, the analysis unravels the reluctance of some trafficking victims to return to their home countries, highlighting the enduring trauma, fear, and socio-economic pressures that impede reintegration. Legislative inadequacies, corruption concerns, and shortcomings in return programs exacerbate these challenges, calling for urgent reforms in legal frameworks and support systems.

Addressing this complex challenge demands a holistic strategy, involving strengthened legal frameworks, augmented law enforcement capabilities, and robust international cooperation. Essential components include awareness campaigns, enhanced regulation of recruitment agencies, and comprehensive support systems for victims. The study emphasizes the critical need for governments, non-governmental organizations, and international entities to collaboratively develop and implement strategies that address the root causes of human trafficking, ensure the protection of victims, and bring perpetrators to justice. In confronting this critical issue, sustained and concerted efforts are imperative to establish a Southeast Asia where the rights and well-being of individuals are safeguarded, and the blight of human trafficking is effectively eradicated.

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