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Advocates’ Experiences With Media and the Impact of Media on Human Trafficking Advocacy

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Abstract
The present qualitative study explores advocates’ opinions of misinformation about human trafficking in the media and describes advocates’ strategies to counter the misinformation presented by the media. Thus, 15 advocates who work against human trafficking in Chicago-based nonprofit organizations participated in semistructured interviews about their opinions and strategies. Data were analyzed using thematic content analysis. The present study identifies specific misperceptions of human trafficking in the media, highlights advocates’ opinions of this misinformation, and discusses advocates’ strategies to counteract inaccurate media, adding support to the role of media advocacy. Advocates note how media images shape and perpetuate stereotypes of trafficking through glamorizing sex work and sensationalizing stories that are most often international depictions of trafficking. Advocates report media generally shares only a piece of the story, simplifying the stories of survivors and the issue of human trafficking. Advocates critique media perpetuating

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these misperceptions for how they may contribute to policies and programs which fail to address structural factors that create vulnerabilities to be trafficked and the multisystem needs of survivors. However, advocates also note misperceptions can be counteracted by producing sensitive, informed media through social platforms. Advocates share their strategies counteracting misinformation through engaging in informative conversations, utilizing social media to educate, and promoting media messages of survivor agency. Research, clinical, and policy implications are also discussed. The present study emphasizes the importance of decision makers and service providers being critical consumers of media and to assess how media portrayals may (or may not) inform their understanding and response to the issue.

Keywords
human trafficking, advocates, media portrayals, public perceptions

Introduction

Human trafficking is a form of violence as one person asserts power and control over another for personal or economic gain and is a serious human rights violation (American Psychological Association [APA], 2010). The Trafficking Victims Protection Act (2000) formally defines human trafficking as the exploitation of a person for labor purposes (e.g., debt bondage, involuntary domestic servitude, or labor trafficking) or a commercial sex act (e.g., sex trafficking) through the use of force, fraud, or coercion, or when any person younger than 18 years engages in a commercial sex act (U.S. Department of State, 2010). Despite discrepancies and debate about prevalence rates (Bales, 2012), it is estimated that 17,500 people are trafficked to the United States each year and 325,000 minors in the United States are considered at risk for sexual exploitation (Estes & Weiner, 2001). It is important to note minors “at risk” for sexual exploitation may include children who are runaways, drug users, and victims of physical or sexual abuse among those being in other distressful states (Estes & Weiner, 2001). For adults, the Human Trafficking Reporting System (HTRS) identified over 2,500 reported incidents of adult human trafficking for investigation between 2008 and 2010, though not all were confirmed as trafficking incidents by the end of the study and many more cases are likely unreported (Banks & Kyckelhahn, 2011). This supports the ongoing challenges noted to understand the prevalence of human trafficking.

It is this complexity of human trafficking that is difficult to fully capture, leading to misinformation presented in the media. Misinformation may include incomplete or false portrayals of human trafficking victims, which may
negatively shape people’s perceptions of trafficking victims and more broadly, attitudes toward violence against women. The present study explores advocates’ opinions of misinformation around human trafficking as presented by the media and describes advocates’ strategies to counter this misinformation.

**The Role of Advocates**

We specifically focus on advocates, as they may be involved in direct social service provision, raise awareness, increase knowledge, and provide community resources for survivors of trafficking. Indeed, advocates may have a variety of roles in working to end human trafficking from management (e.g., executive directors, program directors), administering services to survivors (e.g., social workers, therapists), or awareness raising (i.e., event planning teams, political lobbying). Advocates often perform these roles in community-based nonprofits, which are greatly affected by their ability to influence key stakeholders and to obtain community support through fund-raising or awareness raising (Houston, Odahl-Ruan, & Shattell, 2015; Schmid, Bar, & Nirel, 2008). Advocacy is one skill that nonprofits bring to communities as individuals come together over a common priority for social justice, social change, and resource provision (Salamon, Hems, & Chinnock, 2000).

In addition, advocates’ multirole positions often place them in unique positions to interact with different community sectors and contexts (e.g., working with a victim individually and learning from her experience, speaking to community members during education outreach efforts, and using media platforms to gather and share information with others; Trickett, 2009). Advocates’ unique interactions with individuals at multicontextual levels gives them the opportunity to gain greater knowledge of human trafficking issues, increase understanding of attitudes toward human trafficking, and have the space and ability to counteract misinformation presented. However, it is also important to acknowledge that some advocates may be misguided by misinformation or may perpetuate stereotypes about human trafficking survivors through sensationalized narratives instead of accurate portrayals and statistics, potentially affecting the knowledge of the general public and policy (Baker, 2013; Mielke, 2015). While this tension is raised, it is not resolved in the present study. Still, advocates may be uniquely placed to interact with and correct misinformation about human trafficking in multiple contexts.

**Perceptions of Violence Against Women**

While advocates utilize key skills to address issues of human trafficking, public attitudes and perceptions may affect an advocate’s (or the larger
The Role of Media

Understanding the role media plays in influencing attitudes toward violence against women, and human trafficking more specifically, may inform advocates’ work on human trafficking issues. Studies have found various forms of violent...
media have desensitization effects (e.g., reduced arousal while witnessing violence) and lead to changes in cognitive and affective outcomes (e.g., decreased sympathy for violence victims, increased belief that violence is normative; Bushman & Anderson, 2009; Cantor, 2000). In addition, different media platforms, such as movies, television shows, news stories, and video games are argued to shape attitudes toward violence against women (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Dalla, 2000; Dill & Thill, 2007; Hald, Malamuth, & Yuen, 2010; Malamuth & Check, 1981; Weisz & Earls, 1995). For example, Hald and colleagues (2010) found that men’s consumption of pornography was associated with their attitudes supporting violence against women. Contrarily, Cuklanz and Moorti (2006) assessed a prime-time television program related to sexual violence, identifying factors in the show that promote feminist attitudes.

In addition to the media affecting attitudes toward violence against women, studies about public attitudes of human trafficking in other countries commonly reveal media’s images and messages have an impact on the public’s perception of human trafficking as well (Buckley, 2009; Farmer, 2010; Herzog, 2008; Pajnik, 2010; Tverdova, 2011). Pajnik (2010) suggested the media depictions of human trafficking in Slovenia have shaped the responses of individuals and organizations toward the issue. The overall depiction of trafficking was noted by Pajnik (2010) as contributing to a crime-focused response, calling for stricter policies, saving victims, and controlling borders. Such a response may fail to acknowledge the complexities of human trafficking or the multiple forms of trafficking, shaping uneducated responses to trafficking or contribute to disempowering views of survivors as victims. Other studies have argued that limited knowledge and the media’s framing of trafficking create a “whore stigma” that ignores other forms of trafficking and perpetuates rape myths and victim-blaming (Herzog, 2008). Others may argue that media can be a tool or source of correct information, such as how some researchers cite media portrayals of sexual assault that debunk common myths and raise awareness about consent (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Lee, Hust, Zhang, & Zhang, 2010). However, no study could be found exploring advocates’ opinions on misinformation about human trafficking and the strategies they used to counter such misinformation, specifically within the United States.

Present Study

The purpose of the present study is to explore advocates’ opinions of misinformation around human trafficking as presented by the media and describe advocates’ strategies to counter the misinformation presented by the media. The present study addresses a gap in the literature about trafficking in the
United States and focuses on advocates in the Chicagoland area (urban and surrounding suburban areas of Chicago). The Chicagoland area is a hub for human trafficking due to its proximity to multiple airports and its high gang activity (often involved in sex trafficking) and level of violence (Goh, 2014). Due to one’s own experience with these images or research with violence, the researchers expect and even desire for readers to find themselves relating to these ideas, responding with a phenomenological nod as their own thoughts and experiences are reflected in the results of the project (van Manen, 1997). Our findings describe advocates’ opinions of misinformation about human trafficking within the media and explore the strategies advocates use to counteract and overcome this misinformation.

Method

Sample
The study sample consisted of 15 advocates (volunteers or paid employees) from five anti-human trafficking community-based, nonprofit organizations in the Chicagoland area. Some of these organizations serve one targeted population (i.e., adolescent girls or men in sex work), some serve any individual (i.e., both women and men) older than the age of 18 who has been trafficked, and others focus solely on awareness raising. Participants discussed a variety of advocacy experiences from organizations in which they were currently or previously involved, focusing on tasks such as awareness raising, direct service, intervention, legal assistance, and policy advocacy. Participants represented a variety of roles in their organizations: three were executive directors, six were specialized directors (i.e., communications director, program director, volunteer director), three were interns, and three were volunteers. Participants had been involved in advocacy work against human trafficking ranging from 1 to 8 years. Eleven of the 15 participants were women. The participants ranged in age from 25 to 62 ($M = 32.4$ years old); 12 participants self-identified as “White,” two identified as “Asian American/Asian,” and one identified as “Jewish.”

Data Collection and Procedures
Institutional review board (IRB) approval was received for the study. Potential participants and organizations were identified through personal contacts and Internet searches. The researchers detailed the purpose of the study in emails to executive directors and personal contacts and asked them to share the emails with their staff. Persons who wished to participate contacted the first
author who then scheduled individual audio-recorded interviews at mutually agreed upon times and locations. Individual interviews were then conducted using a semistructured interview guide. The semistructured interview guide was derived from a review of the literature and the first author’s experience as an anti-human trafficking advocate. To account for the personal biases of the first author, an external auditor who was a professor at the first author’s university, reviewed multiple drafts of the interview guide to assess its content and accuracy. The interview guide had three sections: (a) demographics and organizational roles, (b) media images of human trafficking, and (c) the ways these media images shape the work and strategies of advocates. Participants were broadly asked about their opinions on media portrayals of trafficking. In the present study, media was broadly conceptualized with an openness to all mediums of media (e.g., broadcast, film, video games, print media, etc.). Each participant was interviewed once and interviews ranged in length from approximately 30 to 90 min. All interviews were transcribed verbatim by research assistants, and then reviewed for accuracy by the first author. Given that advocates could share countless, unique examples of misinformation from multiple forms of media, the authors looked at the underlying content of these examples to determine when to conclude the interviews. Thus, interviews continued until the underlying themes of the examples of misinformation advocates described did not reveal substantially unique information from the previous interviews (Morrow, 2007).

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using qualitative thematic content analysis, which allows the creation of a category system that links transcripts and themes together in a systematic way to identify underlying meaning (i.e., latent content; Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). By qualitatively analyzing latent content, researchers consider meaning to be hidden and brought to the surface through systematic reflection and analysis (Ponterotto, 2005). This allows researchers to abstract themes and subthemes from the transcripts to describe the experiences of participants, while also acknowledging how the data were co-constructed between the participant and researcher through their interactions, unique characteristics, perspectives, and social positions (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004; Morrow, 2007).

The first author began by making notes after interviews with initial observations and utilized memos during the initial analysis process to note categories and emerging themes. Transcripts were read by the first author and notes were made in the margins. All transcripts were reviewed again by the first and second author and open coded, noting as many categories as necessary to capture
the content of the interview. The first and second author assessed the categories and independently created a category system that grouped together the categories into higher order headings. The goal of this stage in the analysis was to create a category system that collapsed headings into subheadings, while staying close to the content of the transcripts. The authors then reviewed the first and second author’s independent category systems and worked to combine the two structures into a combined structure. After the combined category system was finalized, the authors reviewed the transcripts for these themes and subthemes. Researchers then analyzed the codes by category to write the results.

Results

Results will be presented according to two main themes—(a) advocates’ opinions of misinformation as presented by the media, and (b) their strategies to counteract misinformation—and several subthemes that capture advocates’ opinions and strategies within their anti-human trafficking work. These themes are interdependent, not mutually exclusive. Throughout the results, examples of media that advocates share are presented, where the most common forms of media were news stories, movies, television shows, and media from the music industry.

Advocate’s Opinions of Misinformation

Advocates discuss specific ways that media on human trafficking provided misinformation that shape misperceptions about the social issue. Advocates also describe how news stories, movies, and cultural attitudes more broadly about women and sex also shape misperceptions about violence against women and, by connection, human trafficking.

Only a piece of the story. Many advocates discuss how media often only tells a piece of the story. The media images and stories advocates report often fail to address the complexity of trafficking and frequently skew the issue to maximize emotional impact. Advocates note how the media focuses on the sensationalized details of the situation, but stops short of the process of rehabilitation and healing. One advocate who volunteers on a communications team discusses how these sensationalized stories may retract from the reality of the situation and the remaining challenges and uncertainty a survivor may face after being trafficked:

It [referring to news coverage] sounds like a story and you forget what it is for . . . that girl to be terrified, that she’s just listening to authority and she’s sitting
in a consulate because she doesn’t know where else to go. And there’s so much to it that I feel like you only get a piece of the story and it feels so fake and I think a lot of that is the media coverage. (W15)

This advocate expresses frustration over the missing pieces of the story, such as the complicated process of accessing services and assistance, which may facilitate healing for survivors. Advocates express frustration with media stories where only the conclusion or part of the story is reported, often omitting the rehabilitation process and the barriers survivors may face following being trafficked. Advocates believe that this may encourage public support for simplistic solutions to human trafficking that do not properly address the multiple systems and complexities of the problem, such as cycles of poverty and abuse that may limit access to resources, opportunities, and education.

Alternatively, multiple advocates reflect on positive interactions where news outlets accurately portray stories or discuss new laws to reduce human trafficking that increase people’s exposure to human trafficking. For instance, one advocate who volunteers to raise awareness discusses how in her role as an educator, she uses a well-informed, empowering NPR series on sex trafficking from the words and voices of survivors to educate her students on the issue:

NPR did an amazing series . . . about Oakland and in Texas [about] all the sex trafficking that was going on . . . which is really digestible and . . . it does it from the perspectives of the girls who are being trafficked, which I really wanted my kids to see . . . And we [talk] about “What does coercion look like? What does it feel like? Who are these girls? What are their backgrounds? What are their ages? Where are they living?” and those NPR articles are really good for that. (W6)

Many advocates express their support for news outlets and articles that incorporate survivors’ voices to tell their story of human trafficking and emphasize the use of these forms of media to educate others.

Victims not survivors. These sensationalized representations may also contribute to how many advocates feel survivors are often portrayed broadly as “victims” in media images and stories. Advocates express frustration over images and stories of survivors where the story focuses on survivors as victims, portraying them as weak and helpless. One advocate discusses how in artistic portrayals of trafficking, survivors are often depicted as victims through images of bondage and messages of control: “When we asked for artists to contribute work, it was amazing how artists tried to be relevant by making paintings of people chained up like this [holds hands over head] with nothing
barely covering her boobs” (W2). This advocate and others offer multiple examples of how sensationalized images of victims are disempowering and how these images often emphasize the dynamics of control in a survivor’s experience versus the strength of survivors who are no longer trafficked and beginning the process of healing.

Some advocates also discuss these sensationalized images as a larger issue within the media that presents media images that provoke sadness, but may create a perception that the consumer of this media does not have the capability to respond or do anything about the issue:

Sensationalized media skews the picture of what is really going on and . . . doesn’t actually give the full picture and is more catering to creating an emotion rather than solving a problem because I feel like most of the stuff you see in the media and the images that you see [are] to evoke indignation or sadness or like something like that. There’s no next step for like people who can do something about it. (W15, volunteer)

This advocate feels these images sensationalize the issue in a way that contributes to people feeling they cannot do anything about trafficking. These images also were seen as disempowering as “the image that you’re showing [referring to sensationalized portrayals of survivors] literally is more effective in showing pity versus dignity” (W15). In the present study, advocates often reflect on images of survivors of trafficking, sharing how the images evoke pity instead of empowerment for survivors of human trafficking and emphasized the importance of mindful representations of survivors and their experiences.

**Sex sells.** Another theme arising from advocates’ discussion of media and misinformation of human trafficking is how sex is an ingrained part of American culture and, in advocates’ opinions, shapes media about human trafficking. In particular, participants discuss how the fact “sex sells” shapes the media stories about trafficking to focus on sex trafficking over other forms such as domestic servitude or labor trafficking. Some advocates believe that the focus on sex trafficking is simply because it has to do with sex or that sex trafficking is a hot topic; one participant shares, “Sex trafficking is a sexy topic. If you want to put it that way. It’s uncomfortable to say it but it seems like that’s the topic everyone wants to talk about” (W13, specialized director). Advocates share how they believe this focus on sex trafficking shapes the media’s focus and people’s perceptions of human trafficking to create a hyper-focus on sex trafficking where other forms of trafficking may not receive as much coverage:
Sex slavery is so fascinating to people... so [it’s] definitely represented more than any other type of trafficking. Right now, I mean in Chicago it’s the majority, so you know it’s good that it’s getting the attention that it deserves... but I think it would be amazing if the other types of trafficking got as much press as sex trafficking. (W2, executive director)

This advocate not only acknowledges the importance of bringing awareness to sex trafficking but also recognizes the significance of acknowledging other forms of human trafficking within media representations as well. Overall, advocates recognize how there is a different view of sex trafficking than other forms of human trafficking perhaps due to the sexual nature.

A hyper-focus on sex trafficking may also be driven by a cultural focus on sex, which some advocates connect to how youth view themselves and the prevalence of pornography. One advocate who is a specialized director discusses how he sees the media as sexualizing children and youth:

The images in the media fundamentally are sexting our children in America, younger and younger... and we have let our commercial aspirations take over and really turn youth into sex objects. And I can’t give a better example than Toddlers in Tiaras. It’s the JonBenet Ramsey thing all over again where you have these little toddlers out there being sexted. (M14)

He connects a cultural view and focus on sex to pressures youth may experience in relationships or in society. Furthermore, he emphasizes how a cultural normalization of sex and pornography may contribute to its prevalence and expresses concern over how this cultural focus may also contribute to harmful attitudes as “studies are coming out [suggesting] men who watch pornography become desensitized” (M14). Throughout the study, advocates mention many different examples in the media that are centralized on sex or on individuals being sexy that may particularly affect youth; some examples include Miley Cyrus, Toddlers & Tiaras, hip-hop music and lyrics. Advocates discuss how these images inform their work because they strive to combat the flood of sexualized images by prioritizing educational and development programs for youth.

**Glorification of pimp culture.** Prevalent media examples that some advocates discuss are those portraying sex work and pimp culture. Advocates identify different media images that glamorize sex work and pimps (e.g., Jenna Jameson, *Pretty Woman*, Vegas call girls, Grand Theft Auto, hip-hop music) and discuss a culture that monopolizes on pimp culture (e.g., dressing up like pimps for Halloween, Pimp and Ho parties at universities). One advocate addresses the potential harm that comes from such portrayals:
I think it gives a complete misconception. Not only to the girls at a young age, who are like, “Oh, I want to be like Jenna Jameson someday” or “oh, I want to be like Julia Roberts in *Pretty Woman,* she finds a rich, nice guy by being a prostitute.” . . . I think all these images not only are misconstrued to the young girls but also to the young boys who grow up to be the johns and the pimps . . . I think the media has a big impact on it. (W8, volunteer)

This cultural acceptance of pimp culture is related to a variety of issues including glorification of sex work and pimping, degrading language, and a greater acceptance of violence. The language that is used, particularly by pimps and in some hip-hop music, is degrading and possessive. Furthermore, the language used to describe sex work also glamorizes “the life” (a street term for sex work) and the role of a pimp (i.e., portrays pimp as a doting boyfriend or provider). One advocate recounts that in their educational curriculum, pre-tests demonstrate how students attribute being a pimp with being “glamorous, [that pimps] make lots of money, like he’s the man” (W4, intern). Advocates mention how the culture of hip-hop can glamorize pimping and normalize a pursuit of power over another person, which may have implications for attitudes about human trafficking and violence against women more broadly.

**Attitudes about women.** Many advocates also note media portrayals of violence against women may also perpetuate victim-blaming because patterns of abuse are normalized and may shape the public’s perception and attitudes of violence against women. Advocates discuss how some examples of violence against women in the media are misunderstood by the general public as women are blamed for the abuse because people believe she has a choice to stay or leave. One example is how the media portrayed the famous recording artist, Chris Brown, after he assaulted his then-girlfriend and singer, Rihanna. The advocate who raised this example (W6, volunteer) notes how when discussing this situation with others, many individuals believe that Rihanna must have done something to provoke Chris Brown or that she deserved the abuse, a clear victim-blaming attitude. Thus, advocates reflect on how media may shape a culture of negative, misinformed attitudes about violence against women as these examples are people’s primary frame of reference regarding violence against women. It seems that advocates were relating other media images of violence against women as shaping attitudes about women, violence, and sex, which may relate to or influence understandings and perceptions of human trafficking. Indeed, when asked about how to address these stereotypes and perceptions, one advocate highlights the importance of further education on other forms of violence against women because they are connected to human trafficking:
I think educating ourselves about all the different issues that are connected with human trafficking is a start. I feel like we have a long way to go in being informed about domestic violence and sexual assault and substance abuse, so the education doesn’t just have to come in one little piece but I think we can learn about trafficking from the way we look at sexual assault or the way we look at domestic violence. (W04, intern)

Thus, advocates believe attitudes toward other forms of violence against women intersect with human trafficking perceptions, shaping misinformation and perpetuating stereotypes. Advocates note the importance of recognizing violence against women more broadly and the impact attitudes toward women may shape understandings and perceptions of human trafficking in the general public.

An international problem. The majority of advocates in the present study also share how in their opinion a common stereotype reinforced by misinformation is that human trafficking is only an “international” problem. This label suggests human trafficking takes place in countries outside of the United States. Interestingly, advocates reflect on how misinformation by the media may contribute to people being “uneducated” or misguided on the issue of human trafficking, and “people just don’t realize how close to home it is” (W5). Various forms of media perpetuate human trafficking as an “international” problem and not a “domestic” concern (e.g., 

Taken[a movie that depicts the sex trafficking of a White, middle-class U.S. teen in France], Sex and Money [documentary], an episode of Bones [television show], and portrayals in comic books). Human trafficking advocates express how they perceive the public may be unaware human trafficking is a “domestic” issue or may deny the presence of human trafficking in their local communities and, moreover, in the United States. One local advocate reports,

There is a lot of people that don’t think it happens here [Chicago] of just you know they think of brothels in Cambodia and they think of sweat shops in China and India and Bangladesh and that’s about it. Or you know prostitution in Eastern Europe or Russia and that’s probably the scope of what they envision. So . . . you know, yeah in the media it has been painted as international. (W3, specialized director)

Another advocate states, “[media] is never representing that locals are being trafficked” (M1, specialized director). Advocates, such as this one, describe the inconsistency between the presence of “sexual violence” and trafficking in local suburban neighborhoods and the lack of representation of the issue domestically in media outlets. Another advocate expresses her encouragement
that celebrities are getting involved and raising awareness of trafficking as a domestic concern:

A lot of celebrities have started foundations . . . for human trafficking, like Demi Moore and Jada Pinkett Smith . . . the help of some of these high profile people that were bringing it back home and trying to deal with it [human trafficking] here. (W3, specialized director)

This advocate describes her experiences with media that does correctly portray the presence of human trafficking and encourages individuals to view the issue as both “domestic” and “international.” These media portrayals and advocacy campaigns may help negate the common stereotype that human trafficking is only an “international” issue.

“Typical victim.” In addition to discussing whether the media perpetuates stereotypes about human trafficking as an international issue, advocates discuss inaccurate portrayals of trafficking that perpetuate further stereotypes, such as victims being exotic women forced into the sex trade with little mention of the domestic trafficking these advocates see within Chicago. One advocate discusses how he does not believe that the media represents domestic trafficking as frequently because it may not be as exciting compared with the international stories:

When you think about Taken, we actually debunked the improper ideas that in the more popular fiction it is always these more exotic representations. It’s not cool enough or exciting enough if it’s just domestic, some girl from Chicago . . . I haven’t watched Code Blue, the Chicago police drama, but I feel like [they wouldn’t say] this girl is from Chicago and she’s been trafficked. No, they would be like, this girl is from Europe or whatever and she’s been trafficked. (M1, specialized director)

This suggests some forms of media, such as movies and television shows, may not be as concerned with depicting an accurate portrayal of human trafficking, but rather focus on providing entertainment to consumers, which influences the stereotypes that continue to be perpetuated in the media. Advocates expressed frustration with this commodification of survivor stories and felt it negatively affected survivor’s willingness to share their story. Another advocate shares how she sees an increased awareness of domestic trafficking in the media, but still feels there could be a greater focus on how survivors are often trafficked within their neighborhood in Chicago:
There’s lots of movies and the news media has been doing an increasingly better job at the cases that they cover, and highlighting that we have people getting arrested as pimps in neighborhoods, and you know highlighting the fact that the people who are being rescued are young girls from the neighborhood, but I think those cases are so . . . are down played enough . . . and I think investigations like [those on] MSNBC are really big on the human trafficking stuff, but I think even a lot of those investigations still highlight big issues, but not enough of the domestic issue like the within neighborhood victims. (W09, executive director)

For this advocate and others, the “typical victim” they see most represented in the media, such as news outlet investigations, did not match their experiences as advocates working to end human trafficking in Illinois. From the perspectives of these advocates, the media misrepresented victim characteristics that may contribute to misperceptions of what trafficking looks like in Chicago and the United States more broadly.

**Focus on women.** Many advocates express how media images seem to perpetuate the stereotype that women only experience human trafficking, “there’s a lot more focus on women . . . people just think it’s something women fall into when there’s this whole other community, especially the LGBTQ community, which can be vulnerable to it as well” (W5, specialized director). Such a singular focus on women creates difficulties for advocates as the experiences of survivors are seen as more credible when they are women and thus advocates may experience difficulty accessing and advocating for services for other populations (e.g., men or transwomen).

**Counteracting Misinformation**

Advocates’ share how media also assists their work in counteracting misinformation or is a tool that they use to counteract the stereotypes they had previously identified. With the surplus of images that do not accurately portray human trafficking, advocates use these media portrayals or produce their own media messages to counteract stereotypes or misinformation of human trafficking.

**Spark conversation.** Advocates use moments where stereotypes and attitudes about violence against women arise in media portrayals or in conversation to spark conversation about the issue of human trafficking and to counteract the stereotypes themselves. These examples may happen in their official, “on the clock” advocacy or may arise “off the clock,” where advocates advocate
informally. One advocate reflects on her organization’s education curriculum for youth about human trafficking and how they use media images to counteract attitudes about violence against women that relate to human trafficking:

I think concrete examples can be very helpful, so [Name of Organization] has a curriculum that presents in schools to kids, and it’s very helpful to have specific images or songs or quotes from movies that you can show kids and even teachers as examples . . . it informs a lot of our thinking . . . and our actions. (W4, intern)

Advocates strategically use media images to counteract the messages these images send through conversation and discussion in their official educational and advocacy activities.

While many of the advocates discuss how they use media portrayals of trafficking in their formal “on the clock” advocacy, some advocates also discuss how these images spark conversations when they are “off the clock” among strangers, friends, and family as well. Advocates share how they participate in “off the clock” advocacy through utilizing moments where misinformation arises in conversation to educate others. Advocates often discuss how they view confronting misinformation or insensitive comments as part of their role as an advocate. For instance, one advocate shares how she calls out inappropriate jokes and views this as part of her “off the clock” advocacy role:

On a macro scale, just being the buzz kill at the bar and when some is saying prostitute joke, I’m the person to jump on that and be like “whoa that is not cool that you would joke about that,” you know? So I think in a bigger picture I think that all of us that are involved in the movement should do that. I mean we can’t just sit back and expect people to change, you know especially even in your friend group. I have friends that work in marketing and they have no idea about human trafficking or not to the extent that we do so. I think that is really important to educate your friends who aren’t involved in all this work. (W08, volunteer)

Advocates share how these opportunities, although not their formal advocacy work, are part of their role to challenge negative attitudes and educate others about the realities and complexities of human trafficking.

Create accurate media. One strategy that many advocates employ in counteracting stereotypes is to create more accurate media messages about human trafficking through social media outlets such as Facebook and Twitter. Advocates use these sites in their “on the clock” and “off the clock” advocacy to
educate and correct inaccurate information from media portrayals or to inform their friends or followers about realistic statistics related to human trafficking. Whether these messages are a part of on or off the clock advocacy, these posts often create connections with the public and with other advocates. For instance, one advocate who manages the organization’s social media notes how Twitter connected her to other organizations who shared new strategies to raise awareness about the issue:

There is this one organization in Australia, randomly, they had tweeted something and I was just like, “oh that’s really cool,” so I tweeted to them something and then we started a conversation and they’re like, “this is so great, can we interview [The executive director] from [Name of organization advocate worked with]?” and so we were able to set them up . . . And then there’s another organization based out of the UK and they had like this really cool flash mob thing . . . and it was really cool that they were stopping traffic to stop trafficking . . . for a few moments to just raise awareness. (W15, volunteer)

Advocates use media to prompt conversation, while also using social media to connect with others and learn about new strategies to raise awareness.

**Encourage hope and agency.** Many of the media images that portray human trafficking are noted as being disempowering to survivors. Advocates reflect on how the images and stories of human trafficking focus largely on the details of how the survivor was trafficked and often sensationalize the rescue, but fail to document the process of recovery and healing that highlights survivor’s stories of strength, hope, and recovery. Throughout the interviews, stories about conversations with others arose where advocates encourage messages of hope and agency versus messages focused on control and pity. One advocate shares a conversation that she had with a visual artist whose art focused on control:

I really liked her work, but we just were not comfortable with showing the pieces that she submitted because they were pretty blatant . . . text written across that was . . . harsh, like “trying to control me.” And I just said, “I do really love your work but the message that we want to convey, it’s one more of hope. You know, we want to shine a positive light on you know the change that we can create,” and she responded well, she understood why. She said “Let me see what I can come up with” and she did have a couple other pieces that were more in tune with what we’re trying to do. (W2, executive director)

Experiences like this conversation with the artist are expressed by advocates as opportunities to counteract messages that disempower survivors or
perpetuate stereotypes. Advocates may counteract media portrayals that are inaccurate through conversations or through the use of more accurate media portrayals. Examples of more accurate media portrayals included news from NPR and MSNBC, as well as media messages that were created by other advocates.

Discussion

The present study explores advocates’ opinions of misinformation around human trafficking as presented by the media and describes advocates’ strategies to counter the misinformation presented by the media. In our findings, advocates report that media shape negative perceptions and attitudes toward trafficking by sharing only a piece of the story, sensationalizing and simplifying the issue of human trafficking, painting trafficking survivors as victims, and selling sex in the media culture. For example, advocates found media that portrayed human trafficking survivors as victims created misperceptions that all human trafficking survivors are disempowered individuals who are helpless or lack agency. Similar to our study, Dalla (2000) noted how the movie Pretty Woman creates a view of women engaged in the commercial sex industry as in need of saving and as women who lack agency. This savior mentality may arise from the media’s portrayal of survivors as powerless victims and “damsels in distress,” and not as whole, able persons. This savior mentality may encourage harmful responses to human trafficking that continue to control survivors through taking away survivors’ power or control of their life or recovery.

In addition, advocates discussed how media shapes negative attitudes toward violence against women more broadly and advocates feel this shapes attitudes toward human trafficking. Previous quantitative research found that participants’ attitudes toward violence against women were related to a lack of knowledge about and greater negative attitudes toward victims of sex trafficking (Houston-Kolnik et al., 2016). Several studies have identified common attitudes toward human trafficking that reveal a lack of knowledge and awareness of the issue because these attitudes fail to address the complexity of the issue (Buckley, 2009; Farmer, 2010; Pajnik, 2010; Tverdova, 2011). These stereotypes may be due to a limited, inaccurate knowledge of trafficking and victim-blaming attitudes toward survivors that are perpetuated in the media (Herzog, 2008). Conversely, researchers also found more positive influences of media, suggesting some media portrayals of sexual assault defuse common myths and raise awareness of sexual assault (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006; Lee et al., 2010). However, few researchers have examined how media may be shaping people’s attitudes and perceptions toward human
trafficking in a way that affects advocacy efforts. Thus, the present study highlights how advocates see media contributing to the development and perpetuation of stereotypes and how advocates create strategies to overcome this misinformation.

Although advocates commonly describe how media affects misperceptions of human trafficking, advocates also report using media to counteract such misperceptions through official advocacy and unofficial/off the clock advocacy, creating accurate media images of human trafficking, connecting with others, and learning new strategies to raise awareness. This study adds to the present body of literature by documenting unique strategies that advocates use to counteract harmful media images and messages through encouraging survivor voice and by correcting misperceptions using social media. Previous research has found “media advocacy” is a framework used to promote issues, utilizing the media to apply pressure for policy changes (Wallack & Dorfman, 1996). This framework suggests addressing a social issue at the policy level, but advocates’ roles generally address factors at the individual and community levels. Advocates in the present study reported counteracting stereotypes of human trafficking by creating more accurate media messages to share via social media platforms. Advocates’ strategies may shape public awareness and knowledge of human trafficking in their local communities, but there is no indication that policies of human trafficking are being affected. Nevertheless, our descriptive and exploratory findings of the advocates’ perception of media representations of trafficking within the media and the strategies they use to counter misinformation in the media provides a potential foundation for advocates to further utilize media to create pressure for future policy change.

Limitations

Although these findings help us understand advocates’ experiences with media and the ways media affects or shapes their work, limitations should be noted. Limitations include a reliance on advocates to volunteer to participate in the study. Consequently, advocates who did not participate might potentially have greater or different experiences with different media forms related to human trafficking. In addition, the findings represent viewpoints of advocates particularly in the Chicagoland area, and experiences may differ for other advocates interacting with media elsewhere in the United States. Future research may seek to explore advocates’ interactions with media portrayals in different geographic locations, such as smaller rural towns compared with larger urban cities, or in quantitative studies of relationships between media images and attitudes and perceptions of human trafficking. Furthermore,
because our sample includes predominantly White women, further studies should seek to incorporate greater racial and gender diversity. Finally, our study included advocates from only five human trafficking organizations. Future research may seek to expand the study to more organizations that focus on human trafficking issues among other forms of violence against women. This consideration is based on our findings; many advocates reported media portrayals shaped and perpetuated public perceptions of other forms of violence against women too, such as intimate partner violence and sexual assault.

**Research Implications**

The findings from the current study also offer research implications. The scope of the present study may be expanded to include the perspectives of trafficking survivors and their interactions with media and public perceptions toward the issue. It would be interesting to identify any differences between advocates and survivors’ experiences interacting with different media platforms, and whether survivors create novel strategies to counteract misperceptions of human trafficking based on their experiences. In addition, the present study highlights the importance of considering multiple factors that may affect how advocates strategize to counteract misperceptions of human trafficking given the complexity of the issue. Indeed, it may be useful to understand how advocates, as individuals, interact within different levels of their social context, and how that may shape how well they work on human trafficking issues. For example, an advocate’s scope of knowledge about attitudes and perceptions toward human trafficking may directly affect how the advocate interacts with survivors and creates strategies to counteract misperceptions. On a broader level of the social context, relationships between human trafficking organizations and other social service organizations in the community may shape how advocates interact with media and connect with people to bring awareness to human trafficking. Furthermore, future research should assess the impact of different forms of media advocacy on shaping public perceptions like those about human trafficking. Given the negative portrayals largely depict poor, exotic, or foreign women and girls, further systematic research would benefit from exploring how such portrayals shape perceptions of individuals, groups, and cultures as these depictions may shape further negative stereotypes or prejudices.

**Clinical and Policy Implications**

Though methodological considerations were noted for future research, the present study has clinical and policy implications, encouraging individuals to
be critical consumers of media and creators of content. In our findings, advocates report how the media promotes depictions of human trafficking that may shape misperceptions and perpetuate stereotypes of the social issue, highlighting the importance of the role of advocates to work to increase knowledge and awareness of human trafficking among the public. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of clinicians and policy makers to evaluate common attitudes and perceptions of human trafficking that may be shaped by the media to be cognizant and culturally sensitive to how these portrayals might inform their thinking and action. It may also be important for these individuals to examine how the diverse backgrounds of survivors may or may not be addressed by policies and programs when informed by misguided assumptions and stereotypes. A lack of understanding about the complexity of human trafficking will likely encourage such misguided solutions (Pajnik, 2010). Indeed, the present study highlights the importance of future prevention and intervention efforts to consider the diversity of survivors. The present study shows how advocates perceive the public to be unaware of the diversity of human trafficking survivors beyond sex trafficking (e.g., debt bondage, involuntary domestic servitude, or labor trafficking).

In addition, media images of human trafficking and violence against women that shape or perpetuate stereotypes may also be interpreted differently based on people’s social grouping and orientation. When these stereotypical images do not align with a person’s social identity, individuals may not view themselves or others who do not fit the stereotype as at risk, or they may not readily identify circumstances as human trafficking if the circumstances do not look like the “typical victim” presented in the media. For instance, given the exotic and gendered depictions of human trafficking, people may be unaware of or fail to identify experiences of nonexotic women or men being trafficked. Furthermore, nonexotic persons or males may not view themselves as vulnerable to be trafficked because of stereotypes shaped and perpetuated by the media. Indeed, people’s gender, race and ethnicity, religion, social class, or age may influence what kinds of information related to human trafficking individuals are exposed to, and how they interpret, understand, and are affected by stereotypical images. Further research is needed to understand how social grouping may shape the impact of these images on individual consumers. Furthermore, a greater understanding of such misperceptions or lack of awareness among consumers may give policy makers and clinicians working to serve and assist survivors of human trafficking an eye into potential barriers they will encounter in the public’s acceptance and support of programs and policies geared at assisting survivors.

In addition to being critical consumers, the present study encourages clinicians and policy makers to be critical creators. Indeed, a lack of understanding
of human trafficking may lead to both insensitive, misguided services from practitioners or a lack of support for efforts and policy aimed at assisting survivors of trafficking (Baker, 2013). Certain policies may support simplistic solutions to trafficking that fail to consider the systemic and structural factors such as poverty that contribute to vulnerabilities to be trafficked. These policies often do not address the multisystem needs of survivors and fail to incorporate a strengths-based, survivor-focused model (Pajnik, 2010). Practitioners and policy makers may also create programs and policies aimed at the greater cultural acceptance of violence that advocates experienced in media portrayals and advocacy. The present study shows advocates create strategies using the media to counteract misperceptions of human trafficking, but it is also important for policy makers to create an environment that positively changes people’s perceptions of human trafficking and violence. Curriculums in schools, awareness campaigns, and interventions that challenge the prevalence of violence in the media and in society may be particularly useful. Indeed, the present study supports the importance of practitioners to adopt an ecological perspective of the issue of human trafficking and other forms of violence.

Conclusion

This study contributes to the understanding of the interactions between advocates and the media and how various media might shape misinformation and their advocacy work. We explore advocates interactions with media portrayals and stereotypes, reflecting the media’s influence in shaping public perception of trafficking. The results of this study suggest that advocates are aware of misinformation in the media, noting how these portrayals shape perceptions, perpetuate stereotypes, and shape their strategies to counteract negative attitudes/images. By exploring advocates’ experiences with media images and public perceptions, we hope to encourage individuals, organizations, and media stakeholders to critically analyze the content of images and stories that they encounter and produce. This study offers strategies on how advocates use media to either counteract or contradict common misperceptions about trafficking. The present study hopes to extend current research on public perceptions of trafficking, the cultural influences of media, and the experiences of advocates working against human trafficking. This study also seeks to facilitate further research into the effectiveness of advocates’ work to reduce the effects of trafficking and the role of media, whether positive or negative, in advocates’ work against human trafficking.

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