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CAUTION! A SPIDER'S TRAP! A VISUAL METAPHOR POTENTIAL IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING AWARENESS

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Abstract. This paper explores the potential of using the spiderweb metaphor to support educational programs on awareness of human trafficking. The methods of conceptual analysis and empirical studies showed how the metaphor can shape students' perceptions of human trafficking. The results of the experiments with 60 undergraduates reveal that texts deliberately featuring spiderweb metaphors significantly improve emotional engagement and awareness. The study suggests that integrating graphical representations of the metaphor in educational materials can effectively raise awareness of human trafficking, particularly among young people in Ukraine, and proposes further research to evaluate broader impacts.

Keywords: visual metaphor, spiderweb, human trafficking, raising awareness, education.

Introduction. This paper focuses on the potential of using a *spiderweb* visual metaphor to support educational programs on awareness of human trafficking. It considers the possibility of developing graphical design solutions to enhance the effects of *spiderweb*-associated metaphors in media texts on students for primary prevention interventions. Human trafficking takes multiple forms including recruitment, transportation, transfer, harboring, or receipt of people through force, fraud, or deception, to exploit them for profit. Any person irrespective of their origins or social background can become a victim of this crime (*Human-Trafficking* n.d.). Since the full-scale Russia-Ukraine war Ukrainian citizens have become vulnerable to the potential danger of getting into the human trafficking situation in the hope of going safely abroad. However, for predators and human traffickers, the war in Ukraine is not a tragedy, it is an opportunity. Traffickers prey on vulnerabilities.

According to the Law of Ukraine "On Counteracting Human Trafficking", local self-government bodies, enterprises, institutions, organisations, and individual citizens shall implement measures to prevent and combat human trafficking (*On Counteracting Human Trafficking*, n.d.). As an educator and researcher, the author strives to change student mindsets towards more careful border-crossing and job-seeking abroad. The integration of linguistic and non-linguistic disciplines in a joint commitment to contribute to social change is based on the studies of the cognitive mechanisms of shaping public opinion on the human trafficking situation and empirical research on the perceptions of spiderweb metaphor among students of Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University. This article is a follow-up review of the data obtained, results received, and prospects for developing project solutions regarding the danger of human trafficking represented with graphical means to be used in educational interventions and social advertising.

Literature Review. From linguistics and social sciences to computer and technical research, the potential of visual tools to communicate social messages through visual metaphors has been studied. The social impact of metaphors is multifaceted. Modern metaphor studies have shifted from viewing metaphors merely as tools for understanding the world to recognising their potential to shape social behaviours. Emphasis is increasingly placed on reevaluating metaphors' roles in social contexts (Julich-Warpakowski and Jensen, 2023) and optimising their use to meet societal needs. This field thrives on transdisciplinary collaboration, linking metaphor research to socially significant areas such as social sciences (Leezenberg, 2009; Ghazinoory and Aghaei, 2023), healthcare (Jayan and Alathur, 2021; Deng et al., 2022), public health (Dada et al., 2021), and social care (Siddiqi and Khan, 2022, Jen et al., 2022). Metaphors are increasingly valued as tools for uncovering implicit knowledge and experiences (Petrucijová and Glumbíková, 2021), offering fresh perspectives for social work and education practices.

As an applied research domain, metaphors serve as mechanisms for moderating social behaviour and shaping public opinion. They establish meaningful connections with fields such as law (Hanne and Weisberg, 2018), economics (Zhu 2023), psychology (Landau et al., 2011; De Saint Preux and Blanco 2021), cross-border security and migration (De Backer and Enghels, 2022), military strategy (Al-Muttairi, 2022), media communication (Flusberg et al., 2018, Hullman and Kwiatkowski, 2021), and education (Spours et al., 2022), among others. Metaphors are also essential when traditional methods fail to address specific challenges, such as social care or pressing societal issues.

Main text. A conceptual analysis of 600 media texts revealed a *spiderweb*-like construal of human trafficking. Human trafficking is depicted as a highly organised system of spatial interrelations among various actors, with the victim positioned at the centre. It is shaped by the intricate interrelations among all actors involved in the human trafficking scenario: *family members, law enforcement agencies, governments, and international NGOs* as complicit actors, either as *traffickers* or as *clients*. The

mental image evokes the visual resemblance of a *spiderweb*, where the connections between actors resemble web threads, and the actions of these actors converge on the victim, akin to a spider's prey (Paliichuk, 2011).

The theory of five frames was used to model the construal (Zhabotynska, 2010). These five core frames are the *Thing Frame*, *Action Frame*, *Possession Frame*, *Identification Frame*, and *Comparison Frame*, each consisting of iterative units of meaning. For example, in the *Thing Frame*, the qualitative, quantitative, locative, temporative (time parameter), and mode of existence propositions were modeled. The *Action Frame* was modeled through the interrelation of state, process, contact, causation, agent-affected, result, and consequence propositions. *The Possession Frame* contains the part-whole, inclusion, and ownership propositions. The *Identification Frame* included personification, classification, and characterization propositions; within the *Comparison Frame*, the relations of identity, similarity, and likeness were also analysed, which contributed to uncovering the foundation for the metaphorical projections of human trafficking through the *spiderweb* image. Figure 1 illustrates the victim at the center, emphasising the actor's passivity and the stable interrelationships of the actors. Simultaneously, governments were represented through modal verbs such as *should*, *will*, and *must*, while law enforcement and NGOs were portrayed as ineffective bodies or even as "helpers" of traffickers. These frames were utilised to construct the conceptual spaces of the actors, defined as "a collection of one or more quality dimensions" (Boden, 2009) relevant to each actor in human trafficking conceptual situations.
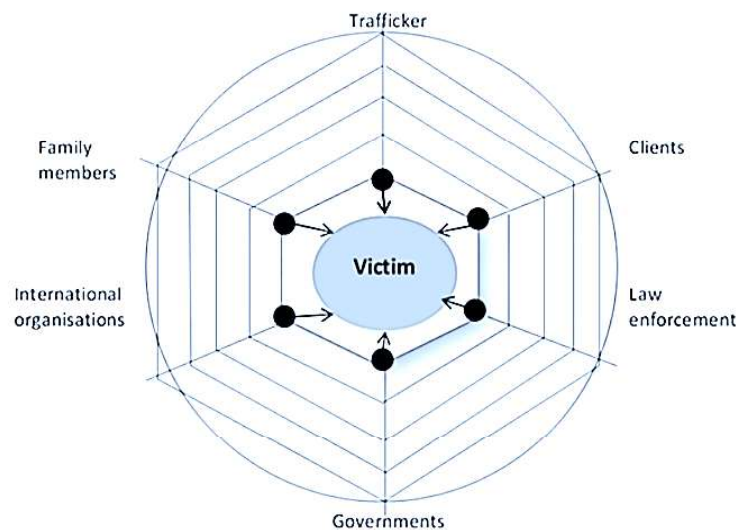

Figure 1.

This construal is manifested in the corpus of 109,876 words (4,877 sentences) (ske. li/spiderweb) generated with the Sketch Engine text analysis software. For instance, it reveals as follows: *The **spider web** of human trafficking; 'I'm like a fly trapped in a **spider's web**,'; ... the victim is **caught in the spider's web**; As **a spider** spins its **web**, **catches** its **prey**, wraps it, and waits for it to die, a trafficker lures and **catches** its*

*victim, spins a mental and physical **trap** around them, waiting for their spirit to break so they can take full advantage of their bodies; Victims of human trafficking have compared the feeling of being **trapped in a spider web**.*

Results. The conceptual, stylistic, and corpus analyses used in the previous studies predetermine the conceptual prerequisites of using *spiderweb* metaphors in educational interventions in an academic setting. An experiment was conducted to verify the effect of students' perceptions and assess the social impact of metaphor. 60 undergraduates from Borys Grinchenko Kyiv Metropolitan University, grouped into three cohorts, participated in the surveys during the ongoing 2022-2023 academic year. The case study covered four media fragments applied in three modes: *authentic (the texts were used in the original), weakened (metaphors in the texts were replaced with neutral descriptions),* and *enhanced (the texts were complemented with metaphors).* In total twelve variables were tested. The *Paired Samples T Test,* which measures the responses before and after participants are exposed to experimental conditions, revealed the changes in student post-reading perceptions, with the highest response to *enhanced* texts. They identify with trafficked people; imagine themselves being in the same situation; imagine sounds/voices; and state their being emotionally affected. Used for the differences between authentic –weakened; authentic–enhanced; and weakened–enhanced, the *Independent Samples T Test,* used for measuring the differences in perceptions between cohorts of participants, revealed the higher degrees for *imagining oneself being enslaved in the human trafficking situation; being isolated; emotionally affected*; and *being more careful about personal safety,* which points to the feasibility of the use of the *spiderweb* metaphor in designing anti-trafficking educational content (Paliichuk, 2023).

Discussion. The results of the conceptual and empirical studies induce further research on assessing the potential of using the *spiderweb* metaphor more explicitly by inserting respective graphical images in educational materials thus enhancing the effectiveness of alternative means of raising awareness of human trafficking among young people in Ukraine. The limitations refer mainly to the restricted size of the sample from one university and to the fact that, currently, the students experience greater emotional pressure and stress living in danger and threats related to the war in Ukraine. Collaboration between Ukrainian universities can mitigate this lack of a larger sample and diversify the audience regarding age, gender, and major disciplines.

Conclusion. The results uncover the properties of the *spiderweb* metaphor in structuring the reading experiences within the contours of the spiderweb-like construal. Metaphors used in the experimental texts can evoke the feeling of co-presence within the human trafficking situation. At the same time, a prospective study should include surveying students using visual representations of the *spiderweb* metaphor in educational materials to raise awareness of human trafficking among young people.

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