

# Linguistic construction of human trafficking in news reports on the Jeffrey Epstein case: A critical discourse analysis

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## Abstract

The paper addresses the concept of human trafficking as a socially constructed problem, influenced by how news reports define exploitation, represent social actors, and convey patterns of control, responsibility, and power. Based on news coverage of the Jeffrey Epstein case, the study explores how human trafficking is linguistically constructed through lexical choices and discursive strategies, and how ideological meanings are framed in the selected data. The dataset consists of three news reports, with three extracts from each, selected for their relevance to human trafficking and their publication within the 2026 timeframe. The study employs a critical discourse analysis approach at two levels. At the micro level, it examines linguistic choices and discursive strategies, while at the macro level it analyzes ideological meanings, power relations, and framing practices in the reports. The findings at the micro level show that lexical choices and discursive strategies tend to represent victims as emotionally, legally, and coercively vulnerable, while institutions and elites are depicted through language emphasizing negligence, authority, or overwhelming power. At the macro level, the reports frame human trafficking as a structural problem sustained by institutional failure, bureaucratic shortcomings, and the influence of powerful actors, while also assigning responsibility and moral judgment. The study concludes that linguistic and ideological patterns are closely interconnected in constructing human trafficking in news discourse. Overall, the analysis demonstrates that trafficking is not portrayed as an isolated crime but as a phenomenon embedded in broader social and institutional structures, highlighting the role of media language in shaping public understanding of exploitation and its underlying conditions.

## 1. Introduction

This paper discusses the concept of human trafficking, a complex social process, that must concern itself with the recruitment, transportation, and exploitation of human beings through coercive, manipulative, or power-based means. Bales and Trodd (2020) emphasize that human trafficking is not merely a crime but a category that is socially constructed and its definition is made by language and representation. To explore this construction, the research will engage in dialogue with news reports coverage of the Jeffrey Epstein case, a high profile scandal of organized exploitation and trafficking of underage girls by a wealthy financier with extensive and extensive political and social networks. These news articles offer a good way of getting into the mainstream debate around the problem of human trafficking to reveal how language creates the narratives of exploitation, power, and responsibility. The research is founded on three selected news articles that report and describe the trafficking operations of Epstein that provides a limited range of data to interpret the linguistic representation and construction of human trafficking. The paper examines how lexical and discursive decisions, ideological patterns and framing practices are used in constructing the meaning of trafficking in these texts by applying a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach. This study is valuable because it reveals the conceptualization and communication of human trafficking, which can be used by researchers, educators, policymakers, and practitioners to learn how language can be used to shape societal views on exploitation, vulnerability, and power. Although the Epstein case has received a lot of international coverage, the linguistic processes by which human trafficking is constructed in news reports are not well studied. The legal developments and the role of the elite in these matters have been extensively discussed in public discourse, yet

limited scholarly attention has been given to the underlying linguistic processes that shape these narratives. In response to this gap, this study examines the lexical choices and discursive strategies used to construct human trafficking in selected news reports on the Jeffrey Epstein case, as well as how ideology and power relations are linguistically manifested and how trafficking is framed within these reports.

Human trafficking is broadly described as a complex process that entails recruiting, transporting, hosting or manipulating people by use of force, deception or misuse of authority. According to Bales (2005), trafficking is carried out using complex factors like force, manipulation, structural vulnerability, and economic or sociocultural pressures. Fundamentally, the circumstances that lead to people being vulnerable to exploitation perpetuate trafficking: poverty, gender inequality, lack of access to education, political instability, and social marginalization. The vulnerabilities are not isolated cases but an extension of a larger system in which the traffickers are selective in the individuals that they target because their circumstances do not enable them to fight or defend themselves. Shelley (2010) notes that the traffickers are likely to do so without fear of consequences that the trafficking networks survive across the borders because of poor governance, corruption and absence of law enforcement. Aronowitz (2014) also notes that these networks are adaptive and flexible enterprises that keep up with the fluctuations in migration patterns, border control, and labour requirements in the world. In most cases, traffickers also rely on legal migration routes, recruitment agencies, and informal labor market, which makes it difficult to distinguish between free movement and forced labor, as Zhang (2012) remarks. Complex networks are also common in trafficking, where there is a blurring of the lines between legal and illegal migration, voluntary and forced movement, consent and coercion. These complexities, as Weitzer (2014) insists, show that trafficking is not an isolated event, but a systemic exploitation that is determined by other social, economic, and cultural dynamics. These background factors are crucial to both placing trafficking in both international and local contexts and to seeing the complexity of the phenomenon beyond superficial or melodramatic descriptions.

Besides its definition and functioning features, human trafficking is now being seen as a social and discursive phenomenon. This perspective highlights that trafficking is not only a criminal practice but also a category that is constructed, defined and given meaning through language, stories and discourse. Competing discourses, such as human rights, crime control, victim-centered discourses, and transformative justice, affect the framing and understanding of trafficking in society (Pinto, 2022). These discourses define the image of a victim, the image of perpetrators and the form of exploitation that is discussed. Trafficking is a social problem because, according to Sen and Baba (2017), the definition of trafficking is characterized, disputed, and negotiated by different actors: the media, policymakers, NGOs, and institutions. This discursive approach allows the researcher to examine how language shapes the overall bodies of knowledge of the general population and why certain interpretations are more prevalent than others, how trafficking is internalized in a broader cultural assumption about gender, power, morality, and vulnerability.

One of the main differences in the scholarly research on trafficking is between the legal and social constructs of trafficking. Legally, trafficking can be defined by certain criteria that define criminal responsibility, the victim status, and state responsibilities. According to Pinto (2022), these legal definitions are necessary to prosecute and protect, but tend to make the phenomenon very limited to what can be proved in the courts. Conversely, social construction of trafficking arises through the discourses of social debates, media discourses, advocacy discourses, and cultural beliefs. According to Sen and Baba (2017), these larger constructions influence the victimized, the types of exploitation that are addressed, and the moral ways society views trafficking cases. The other scholar, Aronowitz (2014), points out that social interpretations may either bring out or conceal some aspects of exploitation based on political, cultural, or institutional interests. Looking at the conflict between definitions of trafficking and social definitions, it thus offers a better understanding of how trafficking is conceptualized and why some narratives become more popular and how these narratives shape policy and popular opinion.

One of the most apparent and popular types of human trafficking is sexual exploitation. According to Shelley (2010), this type of trafficking is perpetuated by international demand, inequalities that are gendered and commodification of women and children in the black market. Victims are frequently recruited by being deceived, coerced, or given false employment opportunities

and traffickers use threats of violence, violence, and psychological manipulation to keep victims under control. According to Farrell and Pfeffer (2014), sexual exploitation is perpetuated by both organized networks and decentralized actors that can easily respond to the law-enforcement pressures. The growth of online platforms has further changed the face of sexual exploitation with traffickers using them to advertise victims, facilitate deals and recruit people online as Latonero (2011) shows. These trends demonstrate the ways that sexual exploitation is changing with the shifts in technology and society, becoming more difficult to identify and interrupt.

Other than sexual exploitation, forced labor is another major feature of trafficking that impacts on agricultural sector, construction, domestic labor, and manufacturing. Zhang (2012) reports that labor trafficking is a prevalent aspect in the informal or shadowed economies, which are not well regulated and the workers are not legally protected. Some of the ways that the traffickers retain the laborers include debt bondage, seizure of documents and threats, particularly those who are migrants and who have language barriers or lack of certainty in their legal status. Crane (2013) stresses that the global supply chains offer the opportunities to exploit people by distorting the responsibility and allowing subcontractors to operate with minimum or no supervision. The exploitation based on conflicts by the state is forced labor and the recruitment by individual intermediaries who introduce the forceful practices as legal employment is also linked to forced labor in most regions as noted by the International Labour Organization (2017). The existence of the other forms of trafficking like forced marriage, organ trafficking and child participation in armed conflict or illegal operations demonstrate the similar patterns of coercion and vulnerability, which points to the range and extent of focus to the trafficking activities at a global level.

Vulnerability, power, and coercion are the most important elements in all these forms to comprehend how trafficking works. Bales (2005) argues that structural inequalities like poverty, displacement, discrimination and lack of social protection are some of the structural inequalities, which traffickers strategically utilize to locate and attract victims. Not all coercion is obvious, according to Kelly (2005), there are instances where the coercion is linked with subtle manipulation of the psyche, misinformation and emotional dependency. These mechanisms are reinforced by social isolation, cultural stigma and loss of autonomy of the victims and it becomes extremely difficult to escape or resist. Brunovskis and Surtees (2008) reveal that the dependency that traffickers develop is usually founded on rewards and punishments cycles such that a psychological state is developed whereby the victims get conditioned to live in fear and helplessness. These dynamics show that trafficking is not only a criminal exchange, but a relations process which is preconditioned by unequal power relations. Vulnerability and coercion intersect, depending on the different forms of trafficking, is also important to understanding why certain groups, namely women, children, migrants, and marginalized groups, are disproportionately affected.

The rhetoric of the populace is extremely powerful to determine the interpretation, discussion, and reaction to trafficking. The perceptions of the population are formed by the media representations, particularly, the emphasis on the dramatic or sensational cases, which are likely to focus on sexual exploitation and omit the issue of labor trafficking or other less glamorous types of coercion. Gozdziaik and Collett (2005) state that such selective reporting restricts the overall knowledge and reinforces the stereotypes about what trafficking and its victims look like. Shelley (2010) notes that media discourses tend to talk about trafficking as a criminal offense and not as a structural issue that has its basis in structural imbalances, which in turn affect the policy response and social empathies. The advent of digital media has increased the pace and spread of trafficking discourses, allowing emotionally charged narratives, moral panics, and misinformation to travel long distances, often overshadowing evidence-based opinions, as Musto (2016) points out. Further, competition on the definition of trafficking exists in social media platforms because advocacy groups and influencers, along with political actors, are inclined to simplify the problem and advance ideologically-oriented explanations that distort the nature of the problem.

These representations also influence the framing of the victims and perpetrators. Hoyle, Bosworth, and Dempsey (2011) reveal that the discourse of victims as passive, innocent, and predominantly women prevails, silencing the voices of male victims, migrant workers, LGBTQ+ and those who are forced into action because of the necessity of earning money. Such representations can reinforce the few ideas of how a victim ought to look, which impacts recognition, reporting and service use. Weitzer (2014) goes a step further to explain how the involvement of local agents,

employers, or institutions facilitating exploitation is usually concealed under the image of perpetrators who are usually termed as foreign criminals or organized networks. Structural factors, including restrictive migration policies, exploitative labor markets and weak regulatory frameworks that lead to the establishment of an environment where trafficking can flourish, may also be hidden by this framing. The reproduction of racialized or xenophobic images under certain circumstances replicates the everyday knowledge, which cannot be effective in formulating policies, by displacing the focus of systemic exploiters.

The discourse employed in the public also influences the conceptualization of trafficking. It has ideological connotations like victim, survivor, rescued or illegal migrants which are used to interpret individuals and events. O'Brien (2013) highlights the importance of how linguistic decisions in media, policy documents, and advocacy campaigns are made to either humanize or strengthen stigma, through the narratives being framed. According to Aronowitz (2014), such linguistic patterns are used to build social realities and legitimize some of the interpretations and marginalize others. Language is also a factor in the formation of institutional responses, with the labels and terms used to determine how agencies sort, distribute resources, and determine intervention strategies. To illustrate the point, in general, the line between trafficking and smuggling is frequently unclear in the mainstream, thus resulting in the wrong classification and the lack of protection towards people who have been exploited during the migration process. The analysis of the role of the language shows that discourse influences the perception of the general population, political agenda, and institutional reactions, which is why critical discourse analysis is crucial in the analysis of human trafficking discourses.

The Jeffrey Epstein case has emerged as one of the most examined cases of modern human trafficking not just due to the magnitude of the offenses but also due to the unparalleled social, political, and institutional connections to the crimes. In trafficking involving elite actors, as outlined by Shelley (2010) it is usually seen that wealth and power may tend to distort the exploitation trends. Epstein was a rich financier with a large network of contacts with high-profile people in the world of politics, academia, and business, who developed a reputation of legitimacy through philanthropy and high social networks. However, behind this facade there were several investigations that showed a history of sexual exploitation of underage girls. Keating (2020) explains that the properties in New York, Florida, New Mexico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands operated by Epstein were more of a controlled environment where recruitment, grooming, and abuse could have taken place with little supervision. In Florida, the 2008 non-prosecution agreement that enabled Epstein to evade federal charges despite having much evidence against him was later adopted as a symbol of how privilege and institutional protection can enable powerful criminals to escape consequences, as Musto (2016) highlights in her carceral protection and elite impunity analysis. With the increased scrutiny, the series of legal developments revealed that Epstein continued his operations and the systemic failures that facilitated them. After the controversial 2008 plea bargain, new investigations, especially by journalists, led to new witness statements and evidence, causing federal prosecutors to revisit the case. According to Farrell and Pfeffer (2014), cases of trafficking are often not investigated appropriately because of institutional blind spots and organizational barriers, which can also be observed in the case of Epstein, where it took a long time to start investigating his activities. The 2019 arrest of Epstein on sex trafficking and conspiracy charges showed that there was an organized business of recruitment where young girls, usually of an economically disadvantaged background, were targeted by peers or intermediaries and enticed with the promise of financial aid or opportunities. There was a cycle of dependency, psychological manipulation, and financial inducement, as described by victim statements and court documents, which kept victims in the Epstein web. Such coercion and dependency cycles, as Brunovskis and Surtees (2008) explain, are typical of the trafficking situation, where the decisions made by the victims are determined by structural vulnerability and emotional control. His death in custody later that year further fueled the debate, with congressional investigations, civil lawsuits, and new investigations of his associates. These changes highlighted how much institutional responses, be it law enforcement, legal actors, or social services, had failed to intervene in the past.

Analyzing the Epstein case in the context of human trafficking allows identifying the patterns that fit the dynamics of human trafficking at large and also showing the peculiarities of exploitation made possible by elite. The recruitment is usually done using social networks, schools and community areas where intermediaries will find girls who are facing financial difficulties or social

weakness. Keating (2020) underlines that the techniques used by Epstein involved psychological coercion, material rewards, and the development of dependency, and this has formed a system where its victims were exploited and recruited to bring other victims.

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) was a by-product of the critical linguistics movement of the 1970s, and was later influenced by the works of Fairclough, van Dijk and Wodak, who held that discourse is socially constructed and socially constructive. Fairclough (1992, 1995) defined CDA as a framework in exploring how language recreates power relations and ideological presuppositions, whereas van Dijk (1993) focused on the cognitive aspects of discourse, demonstrating the effects of media texts on people and their knowledge and beliefs. The discourse-historical approach by Wodak (2001) contributed to the significance of the socio-political background and intertextuality in meaning-making, making CDA a multidisciplinary methodology that combines linguistics, sociology, and critical theory. In this context, CDA unveils how linguistic decisions provide assumptions related to social actors, events, and relationships. According to Fairclough (1995), ideology works through discourse, by rendering certain interpretations natural or common sense. Discourse creates credibility and moral value hierarchies through such aspects as lexical choice, modality, agency, and evaluative language. Van Dijk (1993) goes further to point out that the elite groups usually dominate the discourse of the masses and that the manner in which issues are framed, as well as how the audience perceives social problems, is influenced by the elite. Collectively, these viewpoints place CDA as an effective means of revealing how language propagates power and ingrains ideological stances within ostensibly neutral texts, which is especially useful in the analysis of the representations of human trafficking in accounts of the Epstein case coverage.

CDA is particularly applicable to media discourse since news texts do not reflect reality impartially but are selective representations that are influenced by institutional practices, editorial choices, and ideological leanings. According to Richardson (2007), the meaning created by journalism is based on decisions regarding inclusion, omission, and the manner in which events are framed, whereas linguistic features like transitivity, nominalization, and modality provide subtle directions to the audience (Machin and Mayr, 2012). In the Epstein case, media coverage was a key factor that revealed institutional malfunctions, magnified the voices of victims, and influenced the discourse of the masses on the subject of trafficking, privilege, and responsibility. CDA enables researchers to analyze the way these narratives were developed, the placement of both the victims and perpetrators, and how institutions were assessed or defended. Through the study of the linguistic and structural aspects of news stories, CDA can show the ideological labor that media discourse does and the power relations inherent in it.

## **2. Method**

### **2.1. Data**

#### **2.1.1. Data Description**

The data used in this research is a collection of news reports that discuss the Jeffrey Epstein case, a highly publicized criminal case which includes sex trafficking, children exploitation, and ineffective legal and institutional actions (Richardson, 2007). The reasons why news reports were selected as a source of information are that they present publicly available, factual descriptions of events, legal events, and institutional reactions, which are appropriate sources of information in the context of academic analysis. The chosen reports belong to the high-quality international and American-based sources with the reputation of accuracy in investigations, editorial control, and credibility. They contain hard-news articles, investigations, and official institutional press releases, providing a variety of journalistic styles and outlooks on the events around the Epstein case.

#### **2.1.2. Data Selection**

Purposeful sampling was used to select the dataset in this study to make sure that all materials directly relate to the linguistic construction of Jeffrey Epstein human trafficking activities in a well-defined and modern time. Three news stories that appeared solely in 2026 were selected due to providing credible, publicly available, and thematically pertinent coverage of the Epstein trafficking network, survivor experiences, and institutional reactions to the resurgence of the publication of the

so-called Epstein files. The selection criteria were that each report must be a reputable international source or official agency, explicitly discuss issues of human trafficking and not a fringe of the Epstein case, and that the text should be sufficiently deep to allow both micro- and macro-level discourse analysis. According to these criteria, the following three reports can be included in the dataset: Handling of Epstein files is 'outrageous', say attorneys of his sex trafficking survivors (The Guardian, 2026), Epstein Survivors Furious After DOJ Screws Up File Redactions (News Republic, 2026), Epstein housed abuse victims in London flats, BBC reveals (BBC News, 2026). Collectively, these reports create a corpus of consistent and analytically enriched material, which reflects survivor-based accounts, institutional language, and a worldwide response to the trafficking activities of Epstein.

## 2.2. The Method of Analysis

This study analyses at two levels, both of which are interrelated, the micro level and the macro level. On the micro level, the paper will use the model of critical discourse analysis developed by Fairclough (1995) to analyse the lexical choices with references to four discursive strategies Wodak and Reisigl (2001) identified, namely nomination, predication, perspectivization/mitigation. On the macro level, the analysis is based on ideology, power relations, and the larger processes of meaning-making, once again informed by Fairclough about discourse as a place of social struggle. The study uses the framing theory of Entman (1993) to analyze how news reports define issues, assign blame, and influence the way the public interprets these issues. When combined, these micro- and macro-level strategies offer an analytical framework of the Epstein case in how media discourse creates human trafficking, elite criminality, and institutional responsibility.

## 2.3. The Analysis

### 2.3.1. Report One

Title: Handling of Epstein files is 'outrageous', say attorneys of his sex trafficking survivors

Publisher: The Guardian

Publication Date: 1 February 2026

**Main Idea and Relevance:** The report points out criticism of the mishandling of Epstein related files by attorneys, with how unredacted disclosures put survivors at risk. Its applicability to human trafficking is in its revelation of institutional negligence that makes the survivors more vulnerable and predisposed to secondary victimization.

#### Extract One

"Attorneys representing Epstein's sex trafficking survivors described the handling of the files as 'outrageous' and 'unacceptable', arguing that the failures placed their clients at renewed risk."

At the micro level analysis, the extract involves nomination, where it recognizes the nomination of attorneys and sex trafficking survivors, creating a protector/victim relationship. The predication attributes very strong negative features to the institutional management of the files using evaluative language such as outraging and unacceptable, which adds to the moral disapproval. Intensification is seen in renewed threat, enhancing the severity of the damage and hinting at continued threat. The language is unmitigated, straightforward and reproachful. The use of lexical decisions like failures, risk, and survivors creates a story of institutional irresponsibility and endangering victims.

On the macro level, however, the extract places the attorneys in the role of adversaries of institutional authority in defense of the marginalized survivors, through the prism of Fairclough CDA. The body in charge of the files is framed ideologically as being negligent, and survivors are framed as vulnerable people that rely on legal advocates. The dynamics of power is asymmetrical: the survivors are not agentic, the lawyers represent them, and the authorities are possessed by the institution and abused. In the framing of Entman, the issue becomes the mishandling of sensitive files in the institutions. The failure to safeguard identities by the institution is causal interpretation. Ethical assessment is critical of the actions of the institution. Idealized concept of trafficking: survivors need to be advocated against because of the negligence of the institution and because they are still in danger.

### **Extract Two**

“The lawyers said the release of unredacted information had caused significant distress to survivors, many of whom had already endured years of trauma linked to Epstein’s abuse.”

In the micro level analysis, the extract reinforces the protector-victim dynamic with nomination being used to support the analysis of lawyers, survivors, etc. Significant distress is a predication that attributes emotional damage to the survivors and endured years of trauma is predicated by the long-term suffering. The intensification can be seen in significant and years, which enhances the extent and the time of injury. No mitigation, language is empathetic and serious. Semantic field of psychological suffering represented by lexical devices like distress, trauma, and abuse are brought about by semantic choices which support emotional implications of institutional errors. On the macro level, in the model of Fairclough, the extract brings out ideological presumptions of vulnerability of the survivors and the role of institutions. The survivors are depicted as people with a trauma history and the institution is implicitly guilty to make them suffer further. The relationships of power are not equal: decisions of powerful institutions are emotionally damaging to survivors. The issue is formulated based on Entman framing whereby the harm is the emotional damage arising due to the release of unredacted information. Institutional mishandling is the cause of the interpretation. The ethical analysis criticizes the institution as a trauma-compounding institution. Created concept of trafficking: trafficking leaves long term trauma, which can be aggravated by institutions.

### **Extract Three**

“The release of these files has retraumatized survivors who trusted the justice system to protect their identities, only to see their names exposed once again.”

The extract applies nomination (survivors, justices system) on the micro level analysis to create a dependency and expectation relationship. Predication lays the blame of betrayal on the justice system, who is trusted to expose their names, which puts the institution in the context of failure in its protective functions. The intensification is seen in repeated harm, which is highlighted by the word once again, and in the enriched emotional effect. No mitigation has been made; the language is emotive. Emotional damage and betrayal of institutions are noted through the use of lexical terms like retraumatized, trusted and exposed. On the macro level, with the help of Fairclough CDA, the extract builds an ideological challenge to the institutional power by demonstrating how the justice system, which is supposed to defend the survivors, turns out to be a source of further harm. The relations of power are unequal: the survivors are at the mercy of the institution, which turns them in. The problem outlined in the frames of Entman is the traumatization due to the institutional mishandling. The release of unredacted files is the cause interpretation. The ethical analysis criticizes the inadequacy of the justice system in fulfilling its obligation of care. Idealized concept of trafficking: the victims become victims of secondary victimization because of institutional betrayal and system negligence.

## **2.3.2. Report Two**

Title: Epstein Survivors Furious After DOJ Screws Up File Redactions

Source: News Republic

Date: January 2026

Main Idea and Relevance: The report exposes the DOJ’s repeated failures to properly redact victim names, resulting in breaches of confidentiality. Its relevance to human trafficking lies in showing how institutional incompetence directly endangers survivors—especially minors—by exposing their identities and worsening their vulnerability.

### **Extract One**

“There is no conceivable degree of institutional incompetence sufficient to explain the scale, consistency, and persistence of the failures that occurred—particularly where the sole task ordered by the Court was simple: redact known victim names before publication.”

The extract applies nomination (institutional incompetence, the Court) to distribute roles and responsibilities on the micro level analysis. Predication ascribes recurrent failure to the institution of scale, consistency, and persistence and forms the DOJ as negligently systemically. Cumulative phrasing is the intensive form of expression, and it intensifies failures. Words like no conceivable degree, simple tasks are used lexically to increase the outrage and stress that the damage could have been prevented. It has no mitigation, the language is direct, accusatory. At the macro level, however, with the help of Fairclough and his CDA, the extract is used to engage in an ideological attack on institutional power by depicting the DOJ as an ineffective in its simple protective functions. The Court is placed as the authoritative force that makes orders whereas the DOJ is presented as one that does not fulfill any legal and moral obligations. The relations of power turn the other way round: the institution that is supposed to defend victims becomes the aggressor. Systemic institutional failure is defined as the problem through the framing of Entman. The causal explanation puts the blame on the damage to the failure of the DOJ to carry out a simple task. The ethical consideration criticizes the laxity of the institution. Created concept of trafficking: institutional incompetence increases vulnerability of victims and continues to harm them.

### **Extract Two**

“One minor’s name was allegedly revealed 20 times in a single document, and even after the issue was flagged, only three mentions were corrected while the remaining 17 were left unredacted.”

At the micro level analysis, the extract applies nomination (one minor) to stress the legal vulnerability and status of protection. Predication lays the negligence on the DOJ by saying that only three mentions were fixed, which points to the lack of action. The intensification is observed in the number of digits (20 times, 17 left unredacted) which increases the magnitude of the error and emphasizes the gravity of the violation. No alleviation, the language is objective and accusing. Such lexical decisions as flagged, corrected, and left unredacted give a procedural feel to emphasize institutional failure in a technical activity. On the macro level, however, using the model of Fairclough, the extract shows that there is an imbalance of power where a minor, the most susceptible group of victims of trafficking, is put in the spotlight as a result of institutional negligence. The fact that the DOJ partially corrected the mistake proves the partial or inadequate use of power. The problem, according to the framing of Entman is a revelation of the identity of a minor. The DOJ has an incomplete redaction process, which is causal interpretation. The ethical analysis criticizes the institution in regard to not safeguarding a child. Idealized conception of trafficking: minors are at greater risk because of institutional negligence.

### **Extract Three**

“The release of these files has retraumatized survivors who trusted the justice system to protect their identities, only to see their names exposed once again.”

Nomination is used in the extract on the micro level analysis to create dependency (survivors, justice system). Predication puts betrayal upon it (trusted and only to see their names revealed). The intensification is manifested in once again, which stresses repetitive damage. The use of lexical items (retraumatized, trusted, exposed) emphasizes the emotional harm and institutional breakdown. There is no mitigation present. On the macro level, through the lens of CDA, however, the extract creates an ideological attack on the institutional power through demonstrating how the justice system, which should safeguard victims, turns into a new point of new victimization. The relations of power are not equal: the survivors are dependent on the institution, and the latter does not pass them. The issue according to Entman is retraumatization; the reason is mishandling; the ethical judgment is the blame on the institution. Created concept of trafficking: survivors are subjected to an ongoing mistreatment in the form of systemic failures.

### **2.3.3. Report Three**

Title: Epstein housed abuse victims in London flats, BBC reveals

Source: BBC News

Date: April 2026

**Main Idea and Relevance** The report uncovers Epstein's continued exploitation of women in London flats and the cross border movement of victims. Its relevance to human trafficking lies in revealing a transnational trafficking network sustained by coercion, elite power, and institutional inaction.

### **Extract One**

"Sex criminal financier Jeffrey Epstein housed women who say he abused them in several London flats in the years after UK police decided not to investigate him."

In the micro level analysis, the extract nominates Epstein as a sex criminal financier, a lexical choice that prefigures both the criminality and the elite economic position of Epstein. The women are nominated as women, making it anonymous and vulnerable. Predication attributes of Epstein the negative quality of abused by the verb to create the subject and make him an active perpetrator. The sentence, the decision not to investigate, imposes institutional negligence on the police. The intensification is seen in "several London flats which enhances the scale and organization of the operation. No mitigation, the language is not softened, unsparing, accusatory. The use of words like abused, sex criminal, and not to investigate makes the use of the words lexical, making the story morally charged. On the macro level, however, applying Fairclough CDA, the extract discloses ideological conflicts between strong institutions and weak individuals. Epstein is framed as an elite actor whose riches and position allowed him to further abuse women, and the police are portrayed as complicit because of their lack of action. The relations of power are not balanced: the police have institutional power and cannot exercise it to help the victims, which means that Epstein is allowed to continue running his business. The problem in the frame of Entman is described as institutional failure which allows continued abuse. The decision by the police not to investigate is the causal interpretation. The ethical analysis criticizes the conduct of Epstein as well as the laxity of the police. Idealized concept of trafficking: trafficking continues to exist because institutions do not intervene and allow elite offenders to persist.

### **Extract Two**

"Many of them – from Russia, eastern Europe and elsewhere – were brought to the UK after the Metropolitan Police decided not to investigate Virginia Giuffre's 2015 allegation that she had been a victim of international trafficking to London."

At the micro level analysis, the extract employs nomination to designate the women based on the geographical origin (Russia, eastern Europe and elsewhere), their foreignness and vulnerability. They are built up by prediction as passive receivers of movement (were brought) and lack of agency is emphasized. The police are inferred to have negatively predicted the harm, by saying they decided not to investigate, passing the blame of future harm. The increased severity and transnational character of the crime is manifested in intensification in what is known as international trafficking. No softening is done; the words are plain and clear. The use of words like victim, trafficking and allegation incorporates the discourse into the legal and human rights contexts. On the macro level, however, with the help of the model by Fairclough, the extract reveals the ideological presupposition of the vulnerability of migrants and the responsibility of the state. Their foreignness as women underscores their marginal status in society and the fact that the police did not investigate them shows that institutional power is being used in manners that continue to harm. The power relations are not equal: the police have the power, but they do not use it; the women have no agency and protection. The problem can be defined as the fact of not investigating plausible allegations of trafficking using the framing by Entman. The causal explanation associate's inaction of the police to the fact that trafficked women continue to arrive. Institutional negligence is judged in the moral evaluation as a vice. Constructed concept of trafficking: trafficking is a global crime that is enhanced by institutional blindness and lack of protection of the victims.

### **Extract Three**

"Some of the women housed in the London flats were coerced by Epstein to recruit others into his sex trafficking scheme, as well as regularly transported to Paris by Eurostar to visit him, according to emails in the files."

At the micro level analysis, the extract cites nomination by calling the women and Epstein, which forms a clear victim/perpetrator relationship. Predication attributes coercion to Epstein (were coerced) and points at manipulation and exploitation. The term recruit others presuppose the women as the undesired actors who are compelled to spread the trafficking network. The intensification is present in regularly transported, which highlights systematic and organized character of the operation. No softening is done; the language is harsh and crude. The use of lexical terms like, coerced, sex trafficking scheme, and transported, recall criminality, exploitation and cross border movement. On the macro level, via Fairclough, the CDA, however, the extract is a very unequal power structure with Epstein prevailing over women compelling them to join in their exploitation. The cross-border movement between Paris and London highlights the international nature of the trafficking network and the inaction of different jurisdictions to respond. The extract ideologically presents trafficking as an institutional and systematic practice that is supported by elite power and institutional blindness. Entman conceptualizes the problem as a form of coercive trafficking network. The causal interpretation attributes this to the control by Epstein and failure to do proper control. Ethical analysis condemns the exploitation and the organizational factors that facilitate the same. Idealized vision of trafficking: Trafficking is transnational, elitist, and coercive and based on the elite and institutional ineffectiveness.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

In Report One, the vocabulary is highly foregrounded with regards to institutional failure and exposure of the victimized, using words like the following: outrageous, unacceptable, significant distress and retraumatized. These options form a semantic area of emotional damage and institutional carelessness. The predominant discursive approach is predication with the institution being continuously attributed with negative qualities and the victims are portrayed as people who have undergone long term trauma. Nomination creates definite social positions (attorneys, survivors, justice system), and intensification exacerbates the extent of damage with such terms as renewed risk and once again. Victims are perceived as being weak emotionally and constantly at risk and powerful institutions are seen as irresponsible authorities whose policies and practices aggravate the plight of the people they are supposed to defend. On a macro level, the extracts indicate an ideological analysis of the institutional power, which presents the justice system as an institution that does not fulfill its protective functions. The framing functions that are evident in Entman include problem definition (mishandling of sensitive files), causal interpretation (institutional negligence) and moral evaluation (condemnation of the justice system) with no treatment recommendations being given.

In Report Two, the lexical choices to emphasize procedural incompetence and harm are: institutional incompetence, failures, flagged, unredacted, and numerical intensifiers, such as but not limited to 20 times, 17 left unredacted. These choices denote the extent and precision of the errors. The overpowering discursive approach is intensification, especially in cumulative phrasing and numerical elaboration whereby the severity of the institutional failures is enhanced. Predication blames the Department of Justice and nomination brings to the fore the exposure of vulnerable people including a minor. In this case, the victims are considered legally innocent people whose identities were not handled with care and powerful institutions are represented as thoughtless and incapable of even simple safeguarding functions. On a macro level, the extracts create an ideology of institutional systemic failure, which makes the justice system look like an authority that abuses or overlooks its authority and thus subjects people, more so minors, to further harm. The framing functions of Entman are problem definition (systemic redaction failures), causal interpretation (careless or incomplete institutional processes), and moral evaluation (condemnation of the DOJ negligence), but no explicit recommendations on treatment.

The lexical choices in Report Three emphasize the use of coercion, exploitation and cross border movement, such as sex criminal financier, abused, coerced, recruit, and transported. These decisions create a plot of systematic and global crime. The prevailing discursive approach is nomination, which explicitly signifies social actors such as Epstein as a strong man, the women as individuals who are coerced, and the police as authorities who did not act. Predication attributes coercive and manipulative acts to Epstein and inaction to the police, and intensification in terms of severality and systematisation, as in several London flats and regularly transported. The perspective of victims in this report is that they lack agency and are transported across borders and coerced into engaging in exploitation, whereas the major actors, Epstein and the police, are presented as figures whose

authority or status allowed the perpetration of wrong to go unchecked. At the macro level, the extracts show an ideology of uncontrolled power whereby a rich person can move across borders because the institutions do nothing about it. The functions of framing proposed by Entman are problem definition (a coercive, organized network), causal interpretation (the combination of the control by Epstein and the police inaction), and moral evaluation (condemnation of exploitation and institutional failure), without specific treatment recommendations.

#### **4. Conclusion**

The analysis found that human trafficking construction in the chosen news items is a complicated interplay of lexical, discursive, and underlying ideological meanings. At the micro level, the reports are highly dependent on predication, nomination and intensification to influence the perception of the victims, institutions and strong people. The dictionaries in lexical choices preempt emotional damage, legal powerlessness, and coerced exploitation, and at the same time, reveal institutional weaknesses and elite control. These patterns of language do not just explain the events but are a force in the creation of the phenomenon of trafficking as a vulnerability-based phenomenon influenced by the actions, or inactions, of those in authority. The micro level analysis thus shows how discourse makes victims of people whose agency has been undermined either by trauma, exposure or coercion and institutions and elites are presented as actors whose actions have a profound impact on the circumstances in which trafficking continues.

With the combination of these micro level findings and the macro level analysis, a more detailed ideological image is revealed. All the reports are indicative of an ideology where power is not equally distributed and abused. Organizations like the justice system and the police are depicted as institutions that do not fulfill their protective roles, thus allowing damage to persist. Elite people and especially Epstein are portrayed as individuals whose wealth, mobility, and social stature enable them to act out of effective examination. According to this ideological tendency, trafficking is not created as a criminal act by isolated criminals, but it is a systemic problem that is perpetuated by the existence of gaps in institutions, bureaucratic failures, and the shielding of those in power. The framing by Entman also serves to shed more light on this ideological terrain: the framing of the main issues systematically presents them as institutional negligence and coercive exploitation, as the fault of both individuals and systems, and makes ethical judgments that denounce the abuse of power. The lack of clear solutions in all reports supports the feeling that such failures are deep-rooted and hard to correct.

Combined, the results indicate that the discourse of news creates the phenomenon of human trafficking as something that is entrenched in social and institutional frameworks. Victims are considered those whose vulnerability is determined by emotional, legal, and coercive power, and dominant actors - institutional or elite - are seen as the primary cause of the perpetuation or intensification of harm. This paper combines micro and macro level analysis to demonstrate that the discourse of trafficking is not neutral: it is a reproduction and reflection of wider ideological suppositions of power, responsibility and protection. Finally, the analysis highlights the significance of critically analyzing the construction of human trafficking through media language and the influence that the media exert on the population in its comprehension of trafficking, and how these representations inform the structural conditions that permit exploitation to exist.

#### **Data Availability**

The datasets generated during and/or analysed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

#### **Conflicts of Interest**

All authors in this publication declare no conflict of interest regarding the title, data, location, and results of the research.

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## Supplementary Materials

This study does not include any supplementary materials.

## Declaration on AI Use

The authors declare that no artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript. AI were used only to improve readability and language under strict human oversight; no content, ideas, analyses, or conclusions were generated by AI.

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