

Measuring the awareness level of human trafficking in the state of Alabama

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Abstract

This paper will dive into the importance of understanding what human trafficking is and how we can spread that understanding throughout the state of Alabama. To see what is being done currently to raise awareness this paper will look into what organizations are doing to spread the understanding of human trafficking and if any celebrities are doing the same. Then the paper will look into the government side of human trafficking and what the government has done to protect those enslaved. Then to measure the effectiveness of the current ways to spread awareness, interviews were done to gauge the general understanding of human trafficking. Finally, I will propose my idea on how I believe we can raise the comprehension level on human trafficking and in turn help prevent more people from becoming enslaved.

The personal narrative as to why I became passionate about spreading awareness of human trafficking:

Twenty-four million nine hundred thousand people. That is the number that caught my attention. That is the number of people who are estimated to be enslaved around the world through human trafficking. That number is the biggest number we have seen in history involving slavery. However, a lot of people are unaware this is happening. I did not hear about this worldwide problem until my senior year of high school. I sat in a sermon listening to Christine Caine, a known Christian pastor, speak her testimony of being sex trafficked starting at a very young age which was the first time I heard about sex trafficking. I began researching what this was and why I never heard anybody talk about it before. The concern grew when I discovered that the average age of sex trafficking victims in the United States ranged from 12 to 14 years old. Being 18 by the time I heard the words “human trafficking” and more specifically, “sex trafficking”, I felt almost guilty that I was not aware of this crime before now. Then I had a feeling of relief because by the time I discovered what this was I passed the average age. The guilt crept back in when I realized how many other young children did not know what human trafficking was, but they did not get as lucky as me. They had to find out the hard way. They still may not know what they got manipulated or forced into. The concern for this phenomenon happening should be especially rising in the United States. USA today states that the top three nations for human trafficking victims in 2019 so far are the United States, Mexico and the Philippines.

Sex trafficking is a global issue, therefore understanding various cultures is important in finding an appropriate way to communicate with survivors and current victims. Looking just

within the United States there are cultural barriers. Many of my communication classes helped better my understanding of human trafficking through different concepts and principles. Intercultural communication dove into overcoming cultural barriers while behaving and communicating appropriately and effectively. Intercultural communication also stresses the importance of being open minded which can change how a conversation goes. This includes if you do not know the traditions of a culture to be very open in not knowing so that you are able to learn and others know to teach you. Another class that helps deepen the understanding of human trafficking and how to effectively communicate about the topic to those effected or not is truth ethics and deception. Understanding the power of deception and what deception is made up of is crucial in understanding how sex trafficking works. A lot of times the young women specifically will get trapped into sex trafficking because a male will pose as their boyfriend. The man will deceive the young female and make her believe she is in love. The act of deception is so impactful that it is important to understand especially in breaking the stigma that these women “chose” to be trafficked. It poses the question of how can raising awareness for human trafficking, specifically sex trafficking, prevent people from falling captive. On the same note, the darkside of interpersonal communication dives deeper into the deception and power complex in romantic relationships that the young girls may think they are in. Relating this to human trafficking, a lot of the people that choose to engage in this crime experience a power struggle. In order to prevent this power struggle from happening, there must be preventative measures taken.

This project will look into what organizations, celebrities, and politicians are doing to raise awareness and how effective this is in the state of Alabama then explore ideas of how to

expand awareness. The specific organizations used are A21 and the END IT movement. These organizations were chosen because they are well known in the state of Alabama. Both organizations are nationwide, however, both have specific branches for each state in the United States. This paper will dive into what each of these organizations is doing to raise awareness in the state of Alabama. The celebrity chosen is Ashton Kutcher because he is the only celebrity right now that has done work to prevent human trafficking himself. Finally, in order to make significant change, one must change the laws to prevent future generations from dealing with a tragedy in the same magnitude. Because of this, the government will be looked into. Specifically, in the state of Alabama, looking at what laws are made to protect the victims of human trafficking and what laws are put in place for those that committed the crime to be held accountable. After analyzing the efforts of those mentioned above, I will share my results from a series of individual interviews that were raised in the state of Alabama. The study tested individuals awareness of the issues of human trafficking. Lastly, I will share what I believe can help raise that level of awareness in the state of Alabama, in a hope that the risk of falling victim to sex trafficking will decline.

The importance of defining human trafficking in order to identify solutions:

In order to raise awareness about an issue it is important to have a mass understanding of the issue itself. This coincides with the necessity of bringing awareness to each citizen on human trafficking. Melissa Brown and Rikha Rani wrote in the Montgomery Advertiser, “In 2019, human trafficking is a widely acknowledged problem in the U.S. but it’s also deeply misunderstood, and misconceptions allow traffickers to operate unnoticed- and often in plain sight” (Brown and Rani 2019). This quote pinpoints exactly how critical it is to define human

trafficking and raise awareness with clarity on the issue. Human trafficking is defined as “the illegal practice of procuring or trading in human beings for the purpose of prostitution, forced labor, or other forms of exploitation” according to Dictionary.com. The specific type of human trafficking this paper will focus on is the buying and selling of humans for sexual exploitation also known as sex trafficking. The definition of sex trafficking is “the action or practice of illegally transporting people from one country or area to another for the purpose of sexual exploitation” according to Dictionary.com. It is important to understand that the relationship between the person being trafficked and the trafficker is complex and unique to each case. This project in no way suggests there is one solution but contends that there are many.

A common way that traffickers enslave women is through manipulation. The trafficker, who oftentimes is a man, will begin a romantic relationship with the woman being trafficked. This builds trust between the two of them and makes it harder to believe that the trafficker would commit such a crime. A theory used to describe this break in trust is the Expectancy Violation Theory. This theory is about when relationship transgressions are hurtful because they violate rules and expectations to which romantic partners hold one another accountable (Gilchrist-Petty, 2016 pg. 35). Gilchrist-Petty says, “to cope with this uncertainty, a hurt partner undergoes a sequence of interpreting the event and evaluating the relationship” (2016, pg. 35). This can cause the hurt partner to interpret the event differently in order to cope properly. Gilchrist-Petty goes on to say that more committed partners are inclined to reconcile after a transgression (2016, pg. 35). This can be especially dangerous for those that have been dating their trafficker for a longer period of time because the ability to separate his criminal activity from their relationship gets more difficult. This is shown in a case that occurred in Alabama that was shared in the

Montgomery Adviser. The case was about a woman named Clairra who grew up in a violent home and met a man in a mall who would later become her boyfriend (Brown and Rani 2019). The man was super charming and Clairra fell for him eventually moving into his house and even referred to him as her saving grace (Brown and Rani 2019). Before Clairra knew it, her boyfriend at the time began trafficking her and this was how she became enslaved through sex trafficking (Brown and Rani 2019). Unfortunately, so many stories are started like this, with the manipulation of the victim into believing that they are in a romantic relationship with their trafficker. This story of Clairra being sold into sex trafficking did not happen over night. The man waited months before exploiting Clairra and within these months she grew to trust him (Brown and Rani 2019). This story is shared to show that this crime can happen to anyone and that it happens in Alabama more often than people think. Alabama has Interstate 20 running through it and “Interstate 20 has been called the Sex Trafficking Superhighway because survivors of trafficking are commonly forced to service buyers of sex at truck stops, restaurants and hotels along the route” which creates a greater urgency to spread awareness through this state.

Organizations that have brought awareness of human trafficking to the state of Alabama through the use of technology:

A prominent organization is the A21 campaign that is helping combat human trafficking across the world but also specifically in the state of Alabama. Their message is “We are a nonprofit organization fueled by radical hope that human beings everywhere will be rescued from bondage and completely restored. We are the abolitionists of the 21st century. We work with you to free slaves and disrupt the demand.” (cite). This message is a clear understanding of what this organization stands for by demonstrating inclusivity, passion, and a clear message. A21

campaign has a major event that they hold each year in October. This is a global event that occurs on the same day. This event consists of a walk with shirts that a participant gets through the organization. The shirts have phrases such as “abolish slavery” or the name of the organization on them. The walk is completed in silence to give a voice to those that are silenced through slavery. The Walk for Freedom usually goes viral with the hashtag #WalkForFreedom as people post pictures of them walking all on the same days. The goal is to take over the internet and world on one day to raise awareness. This is the main event that A21 does to raise awareness for human trafficking. In Alabama there are walks in Birmingham, Huntsville, and Mobile. However, A21 gives the opportunity for anyone to start a walk in their local area. This is a unique way of raising awareness for human trafficking, by an internet take over with the #WalkForFreedom and the walk itself taking over the streets of cities worldwide.

Similarly to the #WalkForFreedom, the Endit Movement is an organization that is made up of several nonprofits that are fighting human trafficking everyday. Their vision is to take over the internet one day a year and to post a picture of a red X on your hand. When the picture is posted the caption should be #EnditMovement. The hope is that the hashtag will be posted on many platforms and at a quantity that becomes viral. Once the hashtag becomes viral it will pop up on popular pages on all social media platforms. The language they use for the hashtag is very broad which leaves people curious to find out more. The movement also encourages those participating to stay silent during the day, this is in honor of all of those enslaved who may not have a voice. The red X has become a symbol for human trafficking since the movement began. Every year more celebrities and public figures will post about the movement in an attempt to spread that awareness. Both of these organizations have moved towards awareness of human

trafficking on social media instead of speeches which is effective to those that have access to social media.

A celebrity that has used their platform to raise awareness in all of the United States, including Alabama:

One celebrity specifically who has done a remarkable job of raising awareness in the hopes of defeating human trafficking is Ashton Kutcher. Kutcher has significantly slowed down his acting career because of his organization, Thorn. Thorn is an international anti-human trafficking organization that helps rescue children that are being exploited around the world created in 2009 according to THORN.org. Thorn has been helpful with providing useful sources to many police forces and agencies with technology resulting in many successful rescues.

Beyond the organization Ashton Kutcher has made many public appearances to try to help the survivors and current victims receive justice. Specifically, Ashton Kutcher delivered an emotional speech in front of congress in 2017 that impacted many. During the speech given to Congress, Kutcher wears a red X on his suit. Kutcher explains to Congress that he has been around the world to meet victims of sex trafficking including Russia, India, New York, New Jersey and all across the United States. Kutcher appeals to the audience's emotions as he says “I have seen video content of a child as young as mine being raped by an American man that was a sex tourist in Cambodia, this child was so conditioned by her environment that she thought she was engaging in play” leaving the board in front of him speechless. He goes on to say “I have been on the other end of a phone call from my team saying that a seven year old girl was being sexually abused and that content was being spread around the dark web and she had been being abused and they watched her for three years and they could not find the perpetrator, asking us for

help. We were the last line of defence, an actor and his foundation”. This particular line showed in his speech not only sparked an instant emotional reaction but also made the actor more credible in this field. As Kutcher’s speech goes on, he identifies a software that his team has created that helped track down people being trafficked. Backing up the reliability of the software he states that in 6 months they have identified 6,000 sex trafficking victims, 2,000 of them minors. This speech raised a lot of awareness for human trafficking in the political realm but also the widespread attention it got on social media.

The government’s hand in combatting human trafficking and what they are lacking:

History has shown that it is crucial for laws to keep up with modern day issues. Social change may occur but if the law does not parallel with change than it is not protecting it. The state of Alabama has passed laws to prosecute human trafficking perpetrators, however, there are not enough to protect the survivor of trafficking. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures updated in 2019, Alabama does not allow vacating and expunging to survivors for the crimes they committed while being trafficked. This also includes minors that committed crimes while being trafficked. Without this protection survivors are likely to encounter trouble when applying to jobs, schools, and housing. Having issues maintaining the basic amenities in life enables bad behavior. Luckily, the federal government passed The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures this act includes prevention tactics, protection such as mental health services, and prosecution where they are provided with translators if needed and legal services. This Act is a great step forward in the direction of justice for all survivors and those still enslaved.

Measuring the awareness of human trafficking that a college student has after being raised in Alabama:

While discussing a broad topic such as human trafficking, narrowing down is important in order to eventually address the entire issue at whole. The way that I estimated the awareness level of human trafficking in the state of Alabama is through a series of individual interviews. I will access the results using the communication theory The Spiral of Silence proposed by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. I only looked at college age students that grew up in the state of Alabama. The age range of participants was 18 to 24, both male and female. The study consisted of a five question interview that lasted about 15 minutes per participant. There were a total of 18 participants, 14 being female and 4 being male. With human trafficking being a sensitive topic especially to those effected the questions were very broad based and not personal. The five questions asked were: Can you define human trafficking? Where did you hear about human trafficking first? Did your grade school ever mention human trafficking? Do you know any celebrities involved in the fight against human trafficking? Do you know of organizations to help prevent human trafficking? The setting for each interview was an intimate setting to create a relaxed environment. Each interview took place one on one to take away the pressure to change answers based on someone else's answers. The interviews were recorded to better the interpretation when analyzing the results. Each participant was told at the beginning of the interview that they did not have to answer any question they felt uncomfortable answering. Each participant was told that their answers would be used for this study but their name would not be used and that they were allowed to end the interview at anytime. Each participant was also told

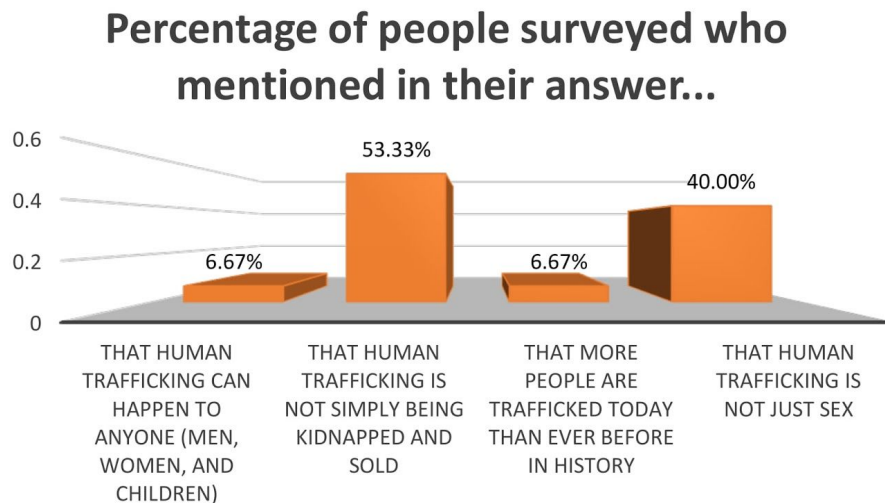
that they were not receiving any reward for participating but that it was based off of volunteering.

Participants who were individually interviewed:

As previously stated, all of the participants were in the age range of 18-24. All of the participants were female or male, 14 female and 4 male. Each participant identified as a current student of either undergraduate or graduate school. They all attend a college in the state of Alabama and they were all raised in the state, as well. All participants are from different parts in Birmingham, Mobile, Tuscaloosa, Huntsville, and Montgomery. Each of them have a connection to myself which created a comfortable environment for them to elaborate on each question asked. I focused on this group because it is easily accessible for face to face interviews and their familiarity with myself allowed them to be more personal with answers creating an extensive amount of data to pull from based off of just five questions. I chose to focus on just Alabama raised students to see if the awareness differed across the state.

The outcome of the individual interviews:

When asking for a broad definition of human trafficking there were a variety of answers. Since the importance of knowing the definition of human trafficking is so high in order to address the issue, I looked at the repetition of themes or words in their answers. Arguably, defining human trafficking is the most important part of raising awareness. In the figure below, I noted four common answers the participants said in their definition of human trafficking.



The graph shows that the most common answer included that human trafficking is not simply being kidnapped and sold. This is a result of each of these students most likely hearing stories similar to Clair's that was previously mentioned. Understanding that people can get enslaved in various ways is key to setting human trafficking apart from kidnapping. Though some cases start with kidnapping a considerable amount do not. The second most repeated answer was that human trafficking is not just sex. Even though this project is specific to sex trafficking it is important to note that labor trafficking is also a terrible epidemic happening globally. The definitions provided all had significant substance, however, all were very different.

Question two asked was on how they heard about human trafficking. Seven participants, all of which were female, said they heard about human trafficking through church and outreach programs related to church. The rest of the participants said that they heard about human trafficking through social media or word of mouth. Almost all of them specifically named Facebook in their answer, mentioning random articles that would pop up on their timeline.

When the participants were asked if their high school or middle school mentioned human trafficking or educated on the crisis, every single participant said no. Few said they heard

through word of mouth at their school. Even those that heard through word of mouth explained that it was never in a structured lesson plan but just in passing.

The only two celebrities mentioned were Ashton Kutcher through Facebook videos and a Christian preacher named Christine Caine. However, those that named them could not name specific work done to prevent human trafficking but only recalled inspiring speeches or sermons. However, the majority of answers were that they do not know of any celebrities advocating for ending human trafficking.

Only four of the participants could name an organization that helped combat human trafficking. Three of the four named the EndIt movement because of the attention it gets on social media from the pictures of people posing with a red “X” on their hand. One named A21 because of their familiarity with Christine Caine.

Overlapping themes found in the interviews:

Reviewing the outcome from the interviews there seems to be a miscommunication on the definition of what human trafficking is in general. This misunderstanding affected the rest of the results because it is hard to answer something that you may not fully understand. Based off of the results there seems to be a general lack of knowledge about the topic. However, the most useful tool seemed to be social media articles when it came to awareness. Social media was easily accessible for all participants because they have smartphones.

The relation of The Spiral of Silence Theory and the lack of awareness of human trafficking:

The Spiral of Silence Theory suggests that people are likely to stay silent when their views go against the majority (Davie, 2016). The issue of sex trafficking is not openly talked

about often because issues such as pornography and sexual relations are brought up. These subjects are seen as taboo to the general public. This creates a barrier between someone wanting to talk about the issue and a majority of people that do not feel comfortable discussing these intimate issues. The silence of those that want to talk about sex trafficking and all of the gory details that embody it, is creating a lack of awareness overall. This is shown through the study I conducted because the results were lacking a general consensus of what human trafficking is.

Limitations faced while conducting this study:

The study was limited to a smaller group because of time restrictions, qualifications, and ability to contact. There were more girls than guys that were able to participate which could create gender bias results specifically because women tend to be more likely to be subject to human trafficking therefore they could hear about it more than a man. I would also have liked to expand the age gap however based off of geography and connections it was hard to set up face to face meetings.

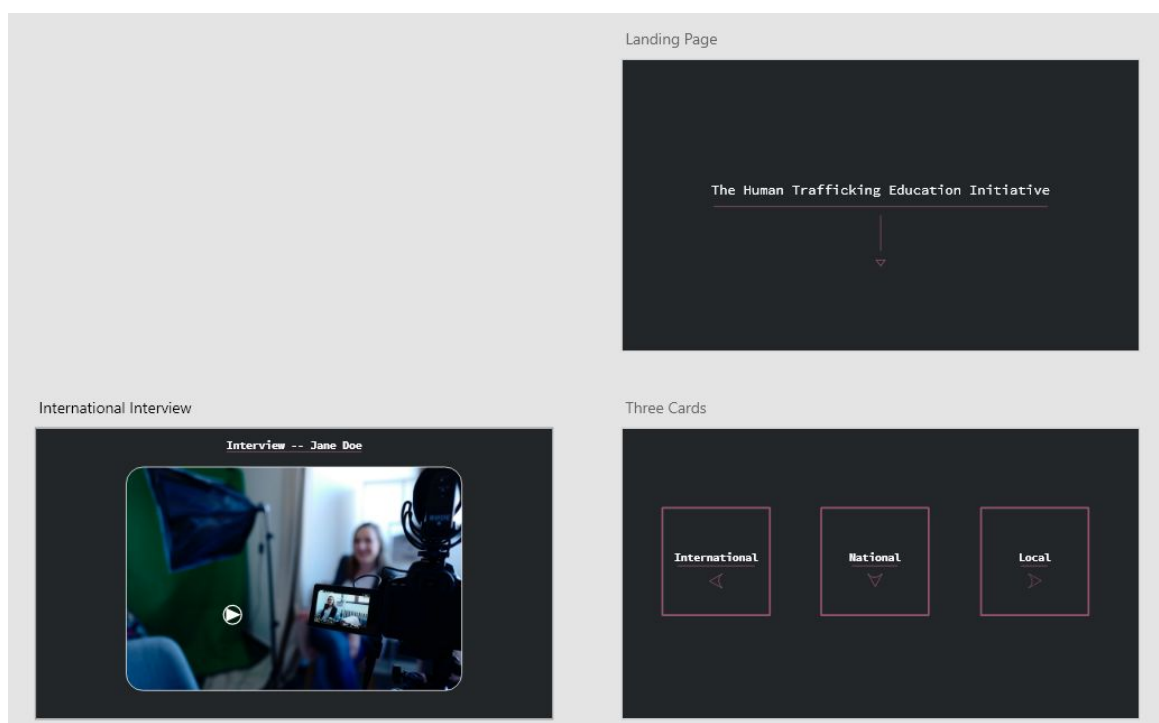
Overall findings:

Social media has brought a good bit of awareness to the crisis of human trafficking, specifically in the state of Alabama. However, for those that can not easily access social media or do not have accounts, they could be lacking the same amount of awareness. The usage of social media is also not in a group environment or structured. This decreases the amount of people that social media can reach. There is a need to reach more about this epidemic beyond the awareness that organizations and celebrities are trying to make.

A possible solution in expanding awareness for human trafficking :

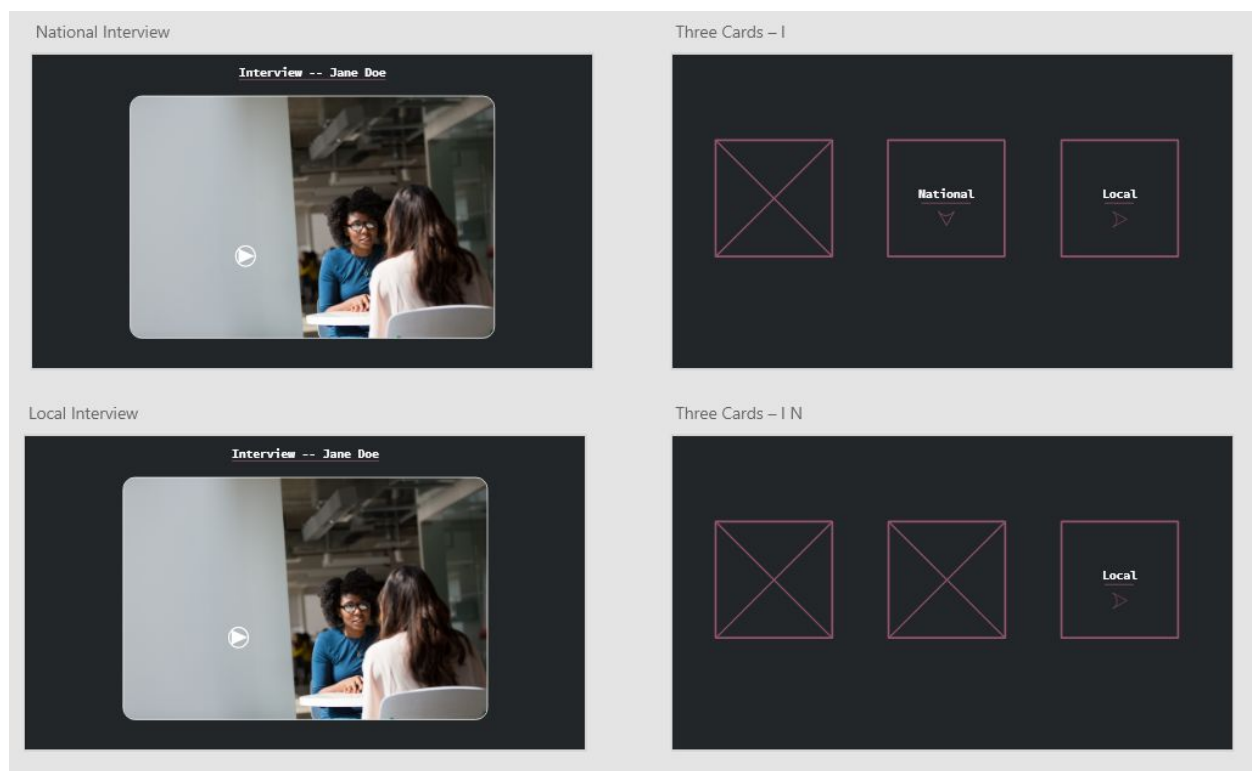
Raising awareness about human trafficking is a preventative measure that helps reduce the risk of someone falling victim to this horrific crime. Looking into Risk Communication Theory, the higher the familiarity the lower the dread (Sheppard, Janoske, Liu, 2012). In order to spread the most awareness and get the most people familiar reducing the risk, we must find a common denominator. With the average age of human trafficking victims being so young, the most efficient way to spread this awareness is through school systems. Structured learning environments are able to provide the tools of educating on human trafficking and have the ability to impact thousands of students. Creating a preventative plan, an idea that could help combat human trafficking is a program to raise awareness for human trafficking in grade schools. The idea I have is to create an online program that is easily accessible for all schools. This program's effectiveness would be modeled after the format of the alcohol edu program that universities require students to complete their freshman year of college.

As seen below in the wireframe for the program, the first screen will be a title page that has a drop down feature to begin the educational program. For the purpose of this project the program will be called The Human Trafficking Education Initiative, but the name may be subject

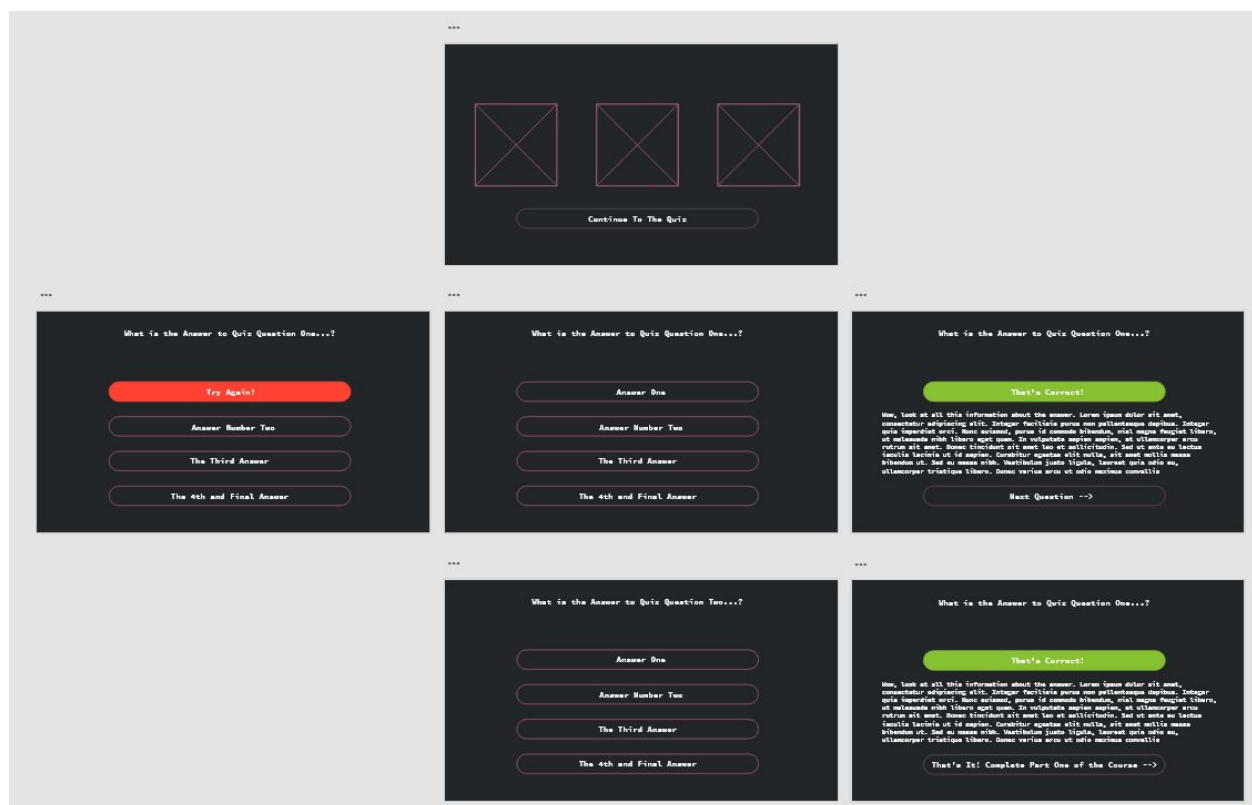


to change with time. Once the student clicks to begin, the screen will show three options to click on “international, national and local” there is no order that is required. The student will pick one of the three options and from there they will relocate to an educational video.

This video will be created by an advocate for human trafficking that has either worked with survivors or is a survivor. This is because with a topic so heavy, there needs to be someone that is an expert on the correct language used when defining and discussing human trafficking. The image below shows the process of going through the educational videos. Once the student is done with the first one they will be relocated back to the first screen with the three options. They will then choose the next until they finish all three videos. The educator in the videos will go through what human trafficking looks like on the national, global, or local (state of Alabama) level. This video will also talk about what to do when you may detect human trafficking and how to spot the crime happening. The videos will also give tips for when the student may be travelling both internationally and domestically.



The wireframe below shows how the page will look once all videos are completed. The student will then take a short quiz on what they just learned in the educational videos. The quiz will not be a grade in the class, it will just be used to understand how much information the student is retaining. If the student gets the question wrong they are able to try again until they get it right. Once the student picks the right answer there will be a short explanation on why it is right, as seen below.



Once the quiz is done, the student will be able to play an interactive game. This game will be an animation of various scenarios that could happen. The student gets to click the response and watch how the scene would play out. If the student hits the wrong response the

game will pop up a message explaining why the answer was incorrect. The game will have multiple versions to mirror the complexity of human trafficking.

This program will be implemented in all public schools across the state of Alabama. The program will take place during the first week of March. This is to kick off Women's month and to place it before spring break. The program will take about 30 minutes and the teacher will be given contact information in case a student has concerns. The Human Trafficking hotline will be appear at the end of the program, as well.

Twenty-four million nine hundred thousand people. That is the number that I urge everyone to remember. That is the number that can be reduced with proper education on the epidemic of human trafficking. Taking the measures needed to reduce the risk of more people becoming enslaved could save anyone reading this and any of your loved ones. It is time to take preventative measures on this issue and to fight back.

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