

Cultural and Rhetorical Violence in Cambodia-Focused Anti-Trafficking Films

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Nefarious: Merchant of Souls, a feature-length documentary film produced to raise awareness about human trafficking, has shaped discourse related to sex trafficking for more than a decade. This study identifies the rhetorical vision promoted by this film and two other anti-trafficking films on Cambodia and diagnoses how their use of language and imagery affects the dignified human identity and perceived worth of Cambodian survivors of sex trafficking, Cambodian parents, and the Cambodian people. The films' rhetorical treatment of sex trafficking in Cambodia amount to unintentional rhetorical and cultural violence that diminishes the perceived value of Cambodian people, potentially impacting their ability to access rights, opportunities, and social standing that are "equal to those accessed by everyone else" (Fukuyama 2018, 32).

Keywords Cambodia, sex trafficking, framing, colonialism, identity

Introduction

Nefarious: Merchant of Souls (hereafter *Nefarious*) is a feature-length documentary film directed by Benjamin Nolot and distributed by Exodus Cry, a Christian anti-sex trafficking organization based in Sacramento, California, and founded by Nolot. Initially released in 2011, Exodus Cry re-released the movie on YouTube in 2020 (Nolot 2020b), making it available to a broader audience through the on-demand streaming platform. Since its re-release in 2020, the film has had more than 2.6 million views, 22,000 likes, and 2,700 comments. The film has won three documentary film awards (IMDb "Nefarious" n.d.), and the official website for the film (Exodus Cry n.d.) indicates that the film has been featured on CNN's "The Freedom Project" and screened in front of the US Congress, the United Nations, and Canadian Members of Parliament. The website also features a quote about its impact from Joy Smith, a member of the Canadian Parliament:

As a Canadian Member of Parliament who has worked for over a decade to combat modern day slavery in Canada, ... Over the past few years, Canadians have been wrestling with our prostitution laws. Your film was very helpful in revealing the dangers of legalized prostitution... In 2012 I was honoured to host a screening of *Nefarious* on Parliament Hill for Senators and Members of Parliament. Now, as of last December, Canada has adopted an approach similar to Sweden and Norway (ibid.).

Additionally, Agape International Missions Cambodia, a Christian anti-trafficking organization, credits the exponential growth of its organization to its founder's participation in the film (Smith 2021).

Finding Home is a documentary film on sex trafficking in Cambodia produced in 2014 by Derek Hammeke and Rapha House, an anti-trafficking non-governmental organization (NGO) based in the US with operations in Cambodia (IMDb "Finding Home" n.d.). The film tells the stories of three Cambodian women who survived sex trafficking as minors. The reach of this film and, consequently, its impact is less significant than *Nefarious*. However, the overwhelming similarities in the framing of the issue by the two films necessitate its inclusion in this research.

The Storm Makers is a 2014 documentary by Guillaume Suon, a French-Cambodian filmmaker. The film explores sex trafficking in Cambodia through the lives of two main characters, a woman who was trafficked to Malaysia as a minor and a human trafficker operating as a foreign labor agent. The film won documentary film awards in 2014 and 2015 (IMDb "Storm Makers" n.d.) and was aired on television by PBS in the US in 2015 (PBS n.d.). While not as well-known as *Nefarious*, its framing of the issue and its representation of Cambodian survivors and parents share similarities with *Nefarious* and *Finding Home*, which necessitate its inclusion in this discussion.

While many studies exist of the phenomena of human trafficking in Cambodia and how human trafficking is framed—that is, the framing of sex trafficking as the predominant form of human trafficking in Cambodia—little research has been done on the effects of anti-trafficking media and rhetoric on public perceptions of survivors and of the Cambodian people as a whole. This study contributes to a better understanding of the effects of rhetoric and mass media on perceptions of human trafficking in Cambodia.

Human trafficking, also known as modern slavery, is a form of violence that has increased dramatically over the last twenty years, with colonial Christian narratives and interventions dominating the anti-trafficking sector in Cambodia (Weitzer 2007; Swartz 2019). Religious rhetoric, when used intentionally, can inspire love, compassion, and inclusion for survivors of human trafficking and create spaces of belonging for people who have experienced exploitation and trauma. However, it can also function as rhetorical violence (damaging perceptions of human value through rhetoric and discourse), amplifying themes

of cultural violence in the forms of stigma, othering, and social, economic, religious, and political exclusion. Considering this rhetorical context, this study asks the following research questions: (1) How do the films *Nefarious*, *Finding Home*, and *The Storm Makers* define the problem of sex trafficking in Cambodia, diagnose its causes, make moral judgments about Cambodian people's role in the development of this problem, and suggest remedies for the problem?; (2) Why is this portrayal compelling, and how does it affect audience perceptions of sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia and the Cambodian people?; and (3) How does the portrayal of sex trafficking affect audience perceptions of Cambodian survivors, parents, and Cambodian culture? To respond to these questions, the study analyzes how the films frame sex trafficking in Cambodia, why the portrayals of sex trafficking in these films are compelling, and how the films' portrayal of sex trafficking in Cambodia affects audience perceptions of Cambodian survivors, parents, and Cambodian people and culture. The content analyzed includes the films, audience comments on both the *Nefarious* YouTube page (Nolot 2020b) and that of an excerpt from the *Nefarious* film called *Buying Children in Cambodia* (Nolot 2020a) that focuses on sex trafficking in Cambodia.

Literature Review

Theories

To analyze the data and respond to the research questions, this study draws on ideas from symbolic convergence theory, framing theory, postcolonial theory, and Francis Fukuyama's conceptual framework on identity. The following summarizes the ideas most relevant to this study, which are applied in the subsequent analysis.

Symbolic convergence theory describes how groups of people use communication to develop a shared reality (Endres 2016). Ernest Bormann (1985, 130) theorizes that audiences of mass media pieces can experience a shared fantasy or "creative and imaginative shared interpretation" of the mass media piece or event that "fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need." As a result of this shared experience, they commonly experience similar "emotions, develop common heroes and villains, ... and interpret aspects of their common experience in the same way" (131). Framing theory, meanwhile, asserts that problems and social issues are framed through mass communication, shaping audience perceptions of the issues. Specifically, Robert Entman (1993) theorizes that framing accomplishes four essential purposes: it defines problems, diagnoses causes, makes moral judgments, and suggests remedies.

As pioneers of postcolonial theory, Franz Fanon (2004), in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Edward Said (1979), in *Orientalism*, identify the underlying attitudes of colonialism that result in unequal valuing of human life and dehumanizing portrayals and treatment of people from non-Western

cultures. These colonial attitudes, beliefs, and actions remain pervasive in rhetoric and discourse concerning countries that are not molded in the Western image. In particular relevance to this study, Fanon articulates the connection between colonialism and Christian evangelicalism and explains the Church's role in shaping and enabling a colonial mindset. "The Church in the colonies," he explains, "[I]s the white people's Church, the foreigner's Church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the white man, of the master, of the oppressor. And as we know, in this matter, many are called but few are chosen" (Fanon 2004, 42). As remnants of colonialism, members of these cultures who accepted and adopted colonial attitudes and practices continue to hold these attitudes and weaponize them against their own people.

In his book, *Identity: Contemporary Identity Politics and the Struggle for Recognition*, Francis Fukuyama (2018, 32) introduces the concepts of isothymia and megalothymia. Isothymia is the desire to be "seen as just as good as everyone else", while megalothymia is the desire to be seen as superior or exceptional. These ideas, he explains, are rooted in Plato's conceptualization of human decision-making into three areas: desire, reason, and worth (thymos). The concept of megalothymia, in particular, adds texture and depth to discussions of colonial ideologies, beliefs, and myths.

Sex Trafficking in Cambodia

Sex trafficking in Cambodia has been an ongoing issue in Cambodia since the advent of the modern anti-trafficking movement in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Over the last two decades, significant progress has been made by the Cambodian government and NGOs in addressing sex trafficking, as evidenced by its lack of prominence in the US Department of State's (2023) "Trafficking in Persons Report." In Cambodia, Christian ideologies dominate NGO narratives of sex trafficking, which frame prostitution and commercial sex work as sex trafficking (Weitzer 2007). These narratives affect both government and NGO approaches to the problem and survivors' experiences in rehabilitation shelters and reintegration programs (Bradley and Szablewska 2016; Cordisco Tsai, Vanntheary and Nhanh 2018). Several papers and studies have explored the phenomena of sex trafficking in Cambodia. Bradley and Szablewska (2016), Derks 2008), and Overs (2013) found that narratives depicting consenting sex workers as trafficking victims in Cambodia led to an increase in physical abuse and violence toward sex workers and a decrease in their access to human rights.

The Butterfly Project, a ten-year longitudinal study of sex trafficking survivors in Cambodia, generated a significant number of publications. Miles et al. (2021, 15), for example, found that survivors experienced social stigma due to their association with anti-trafficking shelters and rehabilitation programs and that twenty-three of sixty-four survivors who had participated in shelter care programs re-entered "exploitation" after their reintegration into

their communities following shelter care. A review of such scholarship reveals engagement with a wide range of survivor experiences—from the experiences of men and boys in sex trafficking to the stigma endured by survivors, the challenges associated with reintegration, and the religious experiences of survivors of sex trafficking (Cordisco Tsa et al. 2022; Davis et al. 2021; DoCarmo, Vanntheary and Channtha 2021; Havey et al., 2021; Miles et al. 2021; Morrison et al. 2021; Morrissey et al. 2021; Smith-Brake, Vanntheary and Channtha 2021).

Thomas Steinfatt (2011) found that estimates of the number of victims of human trafficking in Cambodia were not empirical and have been greatly exaggerated by NGOs working in the country, especially estimates of underage victims. Chang et al. (2020) studied the mental health experiences of girls in shelter care in Cambodia. They found that Christian expat staff (US citizens) attributed improvements in mental health and shifts in identity to faith and spirituality. At the same time, the Cambodian survivors did not mention faith or spirituality as a factor in their healing. Erin Kamler (2011) found that NGOs use rhetorical frames to advance their cause and that these frames often place them in a position of power over victims of human trafficking. Keo et al. (2014), in investigating NGO claims that human trafficking in Cambodia is highly profitable and driven by organized crime, found that human trafficking and sex trafficking in Cambodia primarily happen at a micro level where the trafficker is also impoverished and making survival wages for their role in connecting vulnerable people with those looking to exploit them.

Christian Sex Trafficking Narratives

David Swartz (2019) details the use of evangelical trigger words like “sin,” “good,” and “evil” when narrating human trafficking issues, and even structural injustice issues like poverty and racism, by influential Christian leaders in the anti-human trafficking movement. As Alison Brysk (2009, 15) finds, “Talk of slavery taps into Judeo-Christian religious imagery that appears to transcend ideology, avoiding more challenging sociological frames of labor exploitation or the highly contested issue of immigration rights.” Meanwhile, according to Cojocar (2015, 2), evangelical Christians and radical feminists are increasingly depicting “labor migration for sexual commerce... as sex trafficking.” Keo et al. (2014, 204, 221) argue that “[m]oral entrepreneurs” who “accelerated panic” influenced the development of the current anti-trafficking law in Cambodia. Evangelical approaches tend to involve the criminal justice system “to solve sex trafficking rather than address poor labor conditions,” explains Kotiswaran (2021, 55). Lobasz (2019, 170) points to the evangelical rhetoric of International Justice Mission’s founder, Gary Haugen, who argues that the evils of human trafficking can “only be solved through the power of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.” Furthermore, Lobasz (*ibid.*, 173-4) also identifies the foundational Christian belief driving many Christian anti-trafficking responses—the sanctity of marriage

between one man and one woman, and the inherent immorality and evil of sexual activity and relationships outside of marriage. This Christian understanding of sexual morality drives the narrative of prostitution as sex trafficking, which historically has had a significant influence on the US government's development and implementation of anti-trafficking policy (ibid., 175).

Methodology

This study uses Entman's (1993) theoretical framework for describing the functions of framing, defining problems, diagnosing causes, making moral judgments, and suggesting remedies to analyze the content of the three selected films. The *Nefarious* script was obtained from the transcription file on YouTube. The themes that emerged were analyzed using NVivo coding software to identify how the film *Nefarious* catalyzes a symbolic conversion for the intended audience (Bormann 1985) through moral judgments related to the problem, causes, and suggested remedies pertaining to sex trafficking in Cambodia.

A less extensive analysis of the films *Finding Home* and *The Storm Makers* was conducted by the author to identify the commonalities in the framing of both sex trafficking and Cambodian people across the three films. This article then analyzes the films' attitudes toward and portrayals of foreign missionaries and Cambodians through the lens of postcolonial theory as articulated by Edward Said (1979) and Franz Fanon (2004).

The study also analyzes the transference of the rhetorical vision and the moral judgments that emerge in *Nefarious* to the film's audience through a similar qualitative analysis of the audience's comments on the film's YouTube page. This analysis is accomplished through qualitative coding (according to Entman's [1993] four functions of framing) of the transcript of the film, the comment threads on its YouTube page, and the YouTube comments on the film excerpt, *Buying Children in Cambodia*. The article concludes with an analysis of the identified themes and their effects on the audience's ability to perceive "sex trafficking survivors" in Cambodia, Cambodian parents, and the Cambodian people as "just as good as everyone else" (Fukuyama 2018, 32).

Some methodological limitations should be noted. Audience comments, for example, are not available for analysis for *Finding Home* (film is not available on a streaming site) or *The Storm Makers* (comments are disabled on the video stream). Another limitation is that the selected data sources were coded by only one person (author). Additionally, the analysis of the rhetorical transfer to the audience is limited to the audience members who commented on the *Nefarious* film's YouTube listing. Despite this particular limitation, research suggests that such comments are nonetheless worth examining. A study by Arthur Santana (2014), for example, found that both anonymous and non-anonymous comments

on newspaper articles on immigration in the US elicited uncivil comments that reflected extremist views related to the highly controversial issue. While a portion of the comments were uncivil, they were not found to misrepresent the feelings of the commenters; instead, anonymous commenters were found to be less inhibited. Bandura, Underwood, and Fromson (1975) also found that test subjects acted more aggressively toward people who were represented in a dehumanizing manner when personal accountability for their actions was removed.

Findings

The findings of this study focus primarily on the portrayals of sex trafficking in Cambodia in the three films, *Nefarious*, *Finding Home*, and *The Storm Makers*. The primary findings are from the *Nefarious* film, with analysis from *Finding Home* and *The Storm Makers* providing secondary supporting data.

The Films' Framing of Sex Trafficking in Cambodia

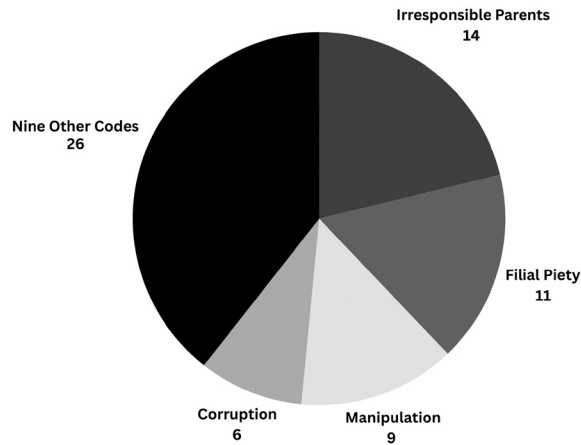
The Films' Portrayals of the Problem in Cambodia: The coding results for the transcript of the film *Nefarious* identified the following eight themes that define the problem of sex trafficking at a general topic level: (1) child sex trafficking; (2) forced sex slavery; (3) the global sex industry; (4) human trafficking; (5) modern day slavery; (6) perpetrators; (7) prostitution; and (8) violence against women.

While prostitution dominates as the primary definition of the problem in *Nefarious* (see Figure 1), the second most common theme—child sex trafficking—

Figure 1. Framing of the Problem by the Number of Occurrences in *Nefarious*



Source: Author.

Figure 2. Diagnosis of the Cause in *Nefarious*

Source: Author.

is the most interesting and relevant to this study. In contrast to the other countries featured in the film, the section featuring Cambodia disproportionately focuses on and sensationalizes *child* sex trafficking. The section of the film focusing on Cambodia is only thirteen minutes long, yet the framing of the problem as child sex trafficking is so strong that it overshadows all other themes, with the exception of prostitution.

In *Finding Home*, the film follows the post-trafficking experiences of three women survivors of child sex trafficking. Like *Nefarious*, *Finding Home* also frames sex trafficking in Cambodia as the trafficking, exploitation, and sexual enslavement of girls who are clearly under the age of consent. Likewise, the main subject of *The Storm Makers*, Aya, is a woman who was trafficked to Malaysia and sexually enslaved while she was a minor. In all three films, sex trafficking in Cambodia is framed as primarily affecting girls from impoverished families in rural, underdeveloped areas who were minors at the time of their trafficking.

The Films' Diagnosis of the Cause of the Problem in Cambodia: Irresponsible parents emerge as the most frequent framing of the cause of the problem in the coding results of *Nefarious* (see Figure 2). This diagnosis of the cause was followed closely by the theme of filial piety. Filial piety is a concept from Confucian philosophy that is common across many East and Southeast Asian countries. The principle of filial piety is that children are obligated to care for and financially provide for their parents to repay them for giving them life and caring for them during childhood (Topor 2021). This outcome is significant because both of these themes are heavily featured in the section of the film focused on Cambodia, as evidenced by these quotes from an NGO leader featured in the film:

So we carried out a research, and many people said, you know, “The reason that those communities are selling their daughters is because they’re the poorest. It’s about poverty. It’s about poverty.” So we said, “Well, let’s go in there and really see what’s happening in those communities.” But we saw in some of these communities, it wasn’t actually the poorest families that were selling their daughters. It could be some of the families that wanted to sell them for more luxury items like mobile phones, televisions, that kind of thing (NGO leader in Nolot 2020b, 44:59-45:30).

But across the way, there’s six men that sit there every day smoke cigarettes, gamble and drink beer all day long. From 10 o’clock in the morning to 10 o’clock at night, that’s all they do. And so how could they afford to do that? Because they all traffic their daughters. They’ll sit there. They could work, but they don’t work. And they traffic their daughters every single day (NGO leader in Nolot 2020b, 45:36-45:57).

You know what the reality is? The reality is about eighty percent to ninety percent of families are selling their daughters. Not forty percent to fifty percent (NGO leader in Nolot 2020b, 45:59-46:09).

This narrative that eighty to ninety percent of parents sell their daughters to be sex slaves is incredibly compelling. However, similar narratives by NGOs about the prevalence of sex trafficking in Cambodia have been debunked by Steinfatt (2011), whose empirical research estimated a total of twenty-seven thousand sex workers in Cambodia. Steinfatt’s study found that the majority of sex workers in Cambodia operate independently and that independent sex workers were much less likely to be trafficked. Of the 4,916 sex workers estimated to work in direct sex work in brothels in 2008, only 1,058 were estimated to be trafficked. This data from 2008 by Steinfatt aligns with data from his research on prevalence conducted in 2003. These numbers raise serious questions about the validity of the prevalence claims made in the *Nefarious* film. *Nefarious*’ coverage of Cambodia focuses on an outskirts area of Phnom Penh called Svay Pak. This area has been highlighted in several documentaries about sex trafficking in Cambodia, with many of them highlighting the same NGO actors and leaders that frame the cause of the problem as the irresponsible nature of Cambodian parents (Seldon 2022).

The Storm Makers film also frames Cambodian parents as irresponsible and willing to sell their daughters to make a living or to pay debts. The film uses statements from multiple Cambodian mothers to portray them as self-interested and irresponsible:

I no longer have feelings for my daughter, not since she had a child. My daughter is the only one who came back with a child. Some migrants die abroad, others come back mutilated, but she returned with this child. And now I have to take care of him. I encouraged her to go because I am poor. I tried to make her a good girl but she didn’t listen to me. Sometimes I’d like her to sell him (Aya’s mother in Suon 2014, 05:15).

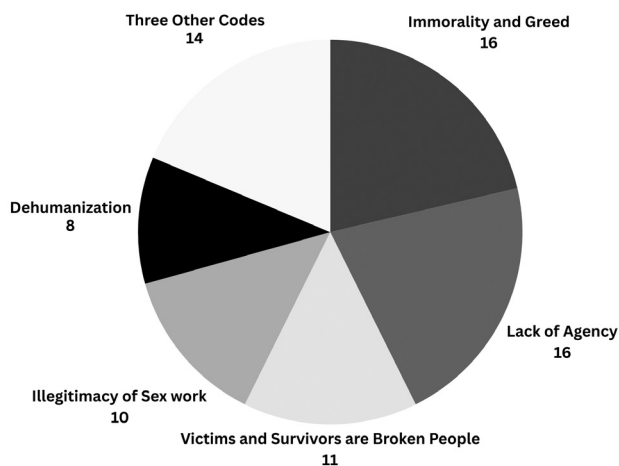
I'm her mother, I should never have sold my daughter, I shouldn't have. I sold my daughter, but if I hadn't, how else could I earn a living? My husband and I are both disabled, I have no land. I don't have any other income. I can only count on my daughter (disabled mother of a female underage trafficking victim in Suon 2014, 26:15).

The second most prominent cause that emerged from the film *Nefarious* was filial piety. The concept of filial piety as a cause of sex trafficking is common in NGO narratives in East and Southeast Asia. A study by Smith-Brake, Vanntheary, and Channtha (2021), for example, regards filial piety as a factor of sex trafficking in Cambodia. In *Nefarious*, filial piety is featured in the film's sections on Thailand and Cambodia. The concept is also prevalent in the stories told in *Finding Home* and *The Storm Makers*. The most compelling presentation of the concept of filial piety, however, came from one of the NGO leaders in Cambodia featured in *Nefarious*:

We knew that the mothers, as much as the fathers, were responsible for selling their daughters. We also knew that those daughters, for them, it was about an honor relationship with their parents. So, because their parents had brought them into the world, they then had an honor debt to pay back to their parents for bringing them into the world. So we were seeing that some of these girls that were approaching adolescence, were actually grooming themselves, knowing that they were going to be sold. They'd seen it happen to families that were around them. So they knew what was happening. So they would groom themselves, because they wanted to honor their parents. For them, if their parents could get more money for them, wouldn't that be a greater sense of honor for them as a daughter? (NGO leader in Nolot 2020b, 48:53-49:42)

In contrast to the narration of filial piety as an issue in *Nefarious* and *Finding Home*, *The Storm Makers* uses a conversation between Aya, the main character, and her mother and visual storytelling to depict how young girls and women are expected to defer to their parents and work to provide for their needs as directed. Aya's reply to her mother's condemnation of her pregnancy reveals that her migration for work, which resulted in her trafficking and pregnancy, was a result of her obedience to her mother: "You're the one who sent me there. You got what you deserved. You should go to Malaysia and see if you can bear their blows! You pushed me there. You got rid of me! You prefer money to your children. Did you ever love me?" (Suon 2014, 6:36-7:09).

While the films accurately depict the obligation children feel in Cambodian culture to provide for their parents, the films ignore the factors of scale and structural injustice that provide much-needed context. As evidenced by Steinfatt's (2011) work, the vast majority of Cambodian parents do not traffick their children. For these families, filial piety is a normal, healthy part of their cultural

Figure 3. Moral Judgement Made by *Nefarious*

Source: Author.

heritage. The depictions of filial piety in the films also gloss over and ignore the deep poverty and desperation that often result from structural injustices and violence in Cambodia and drive the poorest of parents to take desperate measures.

Moral Judgements Made by the Film: While *Nefarious* purports to be a documentary, analysis of the film and its transcript show that it makes several moral judgements about the nature of sex trafficking and the people involved. Three themes emerged from analysis of the transcript as the most common: immoral character and greed, lack of agency, and victims as broken people. Thematically, the film framed people perceived to be involved in trafficking women and girls for sex as driven by immorality and greed. Of the sixteen sections of the film coded for immoral character and greed, eleven were identified in the film's section about Cambodia, where parents were portrayed as indifferent to their child's potential suffering due to immorality and greed. In the following quote, parents are portrayed as greedily choosing luxury over their children: "It wasn't actually the poorest families that were selling their daughters. It could be some of the families that wanted to sell them for more luxury items like mobile phones, televisions, that kind of thing" (Nolot 2020b, 45:20-45:30).

It is important to note here that the Cambodia-focused section of *Nefarious* makes a decisive, though statistically insignificant, moral judgment by establishing a white male American Christian NGO leader from Cambodia as a compelling protagonist and hero who valiantly saves young girls from the perpetrators who traffick them. This section also establishes both foreigners who purchase sex and Cambodian parents as the villains in the film's Cambodia

story. The framing of foreign sex tourists as the villains is unique to the *Nefarious* film. The other films indicate that the primary customers are Cambodian men and local men within the country to which they were trafficked. The focus in *Nefarious* on sex tourists as perpetrators represents a form of colonial blindness where people who look like the hero (the American Christian NGO leader) are more noticeable and important in the film—even in a negative context—than the faceless other. The prevalence of foreign sex tourists is prominent in NGO narratives (Miles et al., 2021) but less prevalent in empirical research like that of Steinfatt (2011).

Likewise, *Finding Home* establishes an American Christian NGO director as the heroic character in the film, saving destitute, impoverished trafficking victims from exploitation and from themselves. *The Storm Makers*, on the other hand, never portrays a survivor. Aya, the main character, plays the role of the victim while her mother and a trafficker are shown to be the villains. However, a devastating twist at the end of the film reveals that Aya also becomes a villain when she admits that she kept the baby she had as a result of trafficking so that she could physically abuse it as a substitute for the trafficker who got her pregnant:

I hate this child. At his birth, I wanted to give him away. When I think about the man who raped me, I say to myself. “Since I can’t do anything to him, I’ll take revenge on his son.” This is why I kept him. To hit him. Sometimes, I strangle him until he suffocates, and I release him just before he dies. When my heart remembers, I hit this child (Aya in Suon 2014, 51:37).

The inclusion of this detailed admission from Aya, while a vulnerable and honest confession on Aya’s part, is designed to elicit a resounding moral judgment from the audience.

Remedies to Solve Sex Trafficking, as Narrated by the Films: The *Nefarious* film is reticent to suggest remedies to address sex trafficking throughout much of the film. In the section about Cambodia, rescue is the only remedy identified, and this is only alluded to briefly. This remedy was suggested in the context of a rescue story by the Christian NGO leader in Cambodia featured in the film. The final nine minutes of the film, however, focus on framing God and conversion to Christianity as the remedy for sex trafficking (Nolot 2020b, 83:07-92:20). The ideas of following Jesus and Christianity as a better way of life and conversion to Christianity as a method of solving the problems facing both trafficked women and men responsible for trafficking women emerge over these last few minutes of the film. To emphasize this framing, people featured earlier in the film reappear at the end to share their conversion experiences. After a few people from the film tell their redemption stories, a popular Christian song about the redeeming power of God’s love plays in the background and continues through the remainder of the film:

He is jealous for me
loves like a hurricane
I am a tree bending beneath the weight of his wind and mercy
And all of a sudden, I'm unaware of these afflictions eclipsed by glory
and I realize just how beautiful you are and how great your affections are for me (Nolot 2020b, 87:38-88:12).

The film closes with the narrator referencing a 19th Century abolitionist named William Wilberforce, who believed slavery was a spiritual battle that could only be won through (Christian) prayer (ibid., 95:03).

Similarly, from the beginning of the film *Finding Home*, Christianity and intervention from God are framed as the reasons why some women can escape from trafficking and recover at the NGO's shelter. Sophany, one of the survivors featured in the film, describes the spiritual journey of survivors entering the shelter, "So I think that God prepared a plan so that they can come to know this place. Like know God and look at their own life" (Hammeke and Rapha House 2014, 9:05). In the middle of the film, Sophany marries and has a very Western, Christian wedding. Her Christian marriage creates a symbolic fairy-tale-ending for the audience that recalls a common biblical narrative, "[A]ll things work together for good ..." (YouVersion n.d., Romans 8:28) which is a symbolic cue deeply embedded in Christian culture used to reassure members of the community that even in difficult times God will take care of them.

In contrast to *Nefarious* and *Finding Home*, *The Storm Makers* does not attempt to suggest a remedy for sex trafficking. Instead, it leaves the audience to wrestle with the brutal reality and complexity of the stories it shares. Of particular interest and contrast is the story of the trafficker, a relatively affluent Cambodian man who spends his time on camera detailing how he manipulates, abuses, and sells people to make a profit. He is later shown telling parents and the children whom he is recruiting that he cannot lie to them because he is a Christian. In the end, he is revealed to be the pastor of a Cambodian Christian church. His prayer as the scene closes reminds viewers that not all Christians are equal. The pastor prays, "I hope that later, when I die, thanks to my good deeds, and since have never hurt anyone. Lord Jesus Christ will take me to heaven with him" (Suon 2014, 50:16-50:31). Rather than offering stories of conversions to Christianity as the closing frame of the film (as was the case with the other two films), this scene presents a Cambodian Christian only symbolically giving himself to God while metaphorically exemplifying the wolf in sheep's clothing that is warned about in Matthew 7:15. This presentation of Christianity, while seemingly counter to the framing of Christianity in the other films, has limited effects on the perception of Christianity. Rather, the framing of the Cambodian pastor as the wolf in sheep's clothing has a much more weighted impact on perceptions of the moral and ethical character of Cambodian people and the legitimacy of Cambodian Christianity.

Effects of the Film's Framing on Audience Perceptions of Survivors and the Cambodian People

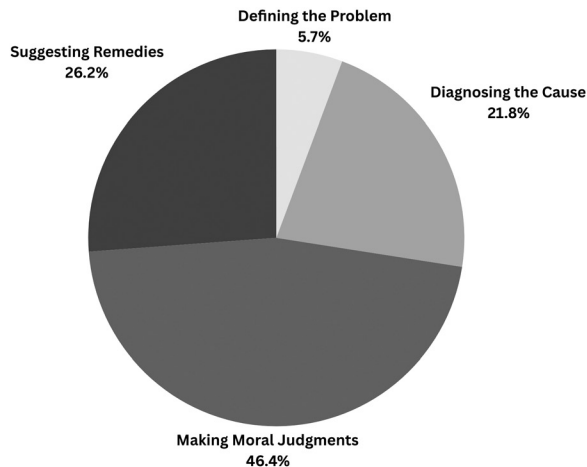
This study's second layer of analysis focuses on understanding the transfer of the *Nefarious* film's framing of the issue to the audience. This was accomplished by coding the YouTube comments for *Nefarious* (Nolot 2020b) and the film's excerpt of its section on Cambodia, *Buying Children in Cambodia* (Nolot 2020a), which was also published by the distributor on YouTube. Analysis of audience comments on the other films, *Finding Home* and *The Storm Makers*, is not possible because these films have not been released on a platform where comments are enabled.

In the YouTube comments on the full *Nefarious* film and the excerpt, *Buying Children in Cambodia*, the distribution of codes across the four framing functions shifted dramatically from the codes in the film's transcript. In audience comments on both the full movie and the excerpt, the category of moral judgments had the largest number of identified occurrences, followed by suggested remedies, diagnosis of causes, and definitions of the problem (see Figure 4).

Audience Perception of the Problem: In comments on the full film, perpetrators emerged as the dominant definition of the problem of sex trafficking, followed closely by prostitution. Other more general themes like human trafficking, the global sex industry, and forced sex slavery had less than half as many occurrences in audience comments.

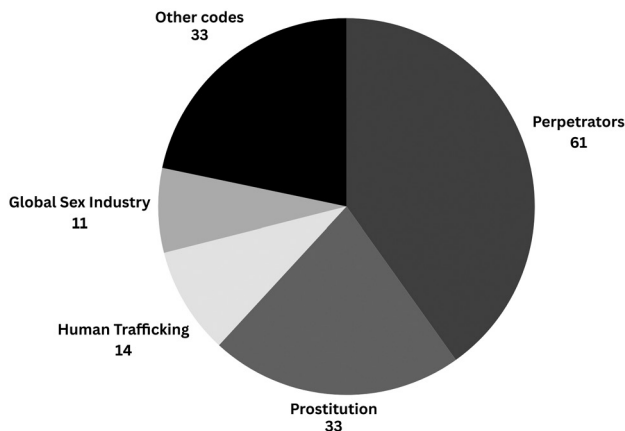
In audience comments on the Cambodia excerpt from the film, perpetrators were again the most identified definition of the problem, with child sex trafficking coming in a distant second place. Figure 5 shows the combined code distribution

Figure 4. Collective Distribution of Codes across the Four Functions of Framing in Comments on *Nefarious* and *Buying Children in Cambodia* (Excerpt)



Source: Author.

Figure 5. Audience Definitions of the Problem in Comments on *Nefarious* and *Buying Children in Cambodia* (Excerpt)



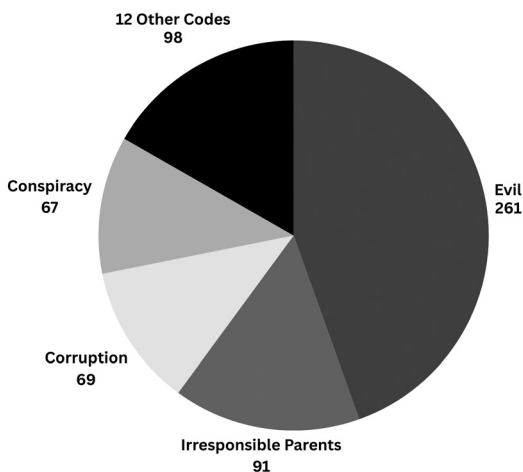
Source: Author.

for the entire film and its excerpt.

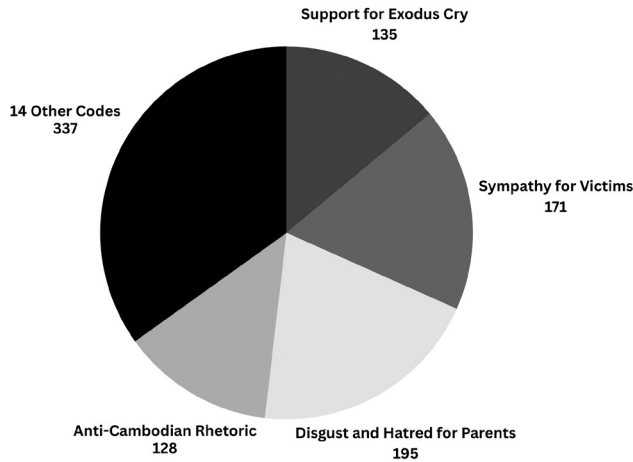
Audience Diagnosis of the Causes of Sex Trafficking: Analysis of audience comments on both the full film and the film excerpt revealed “evil” as the most common diagnosis of the cause of sex trafficking, while irresponsible parents was the second most common diagnosis (see Figure 6).

Moral Judgements about Sex Trafficking by the Audience: The moral

Figure 6. Diagnosing the Cause in Comments on *Nefarious* and *Buying Children in Cambodia* (Excerpt)



Source: Author.

Figure 7. Moral Judgements in Comments on *Nefarious* and *Buying Children in Cambodia* (Excerpt)

Source: Author.

judgment themes that emerged from audience comments on both the film and its excerpt, Figure 7, present interesting similarities and contrasts to the moral judgments presented in the film. Four themes emerge as notable in the combined analysis of comments on both the full film and the excerpt. Support for Exodus Cry, the distributor and organization founded by the film's director/producer, was dominant in comments on the full film. Sympathy for victims and disgust and hatred for parents were prominent in both comment threads, and anti-Cambodian rhetoric was particularly strong in comments on the excerpt.

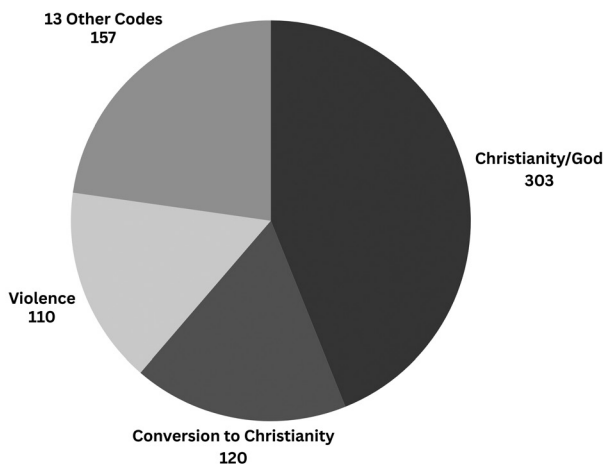
The emergence of anti-Cambodian rhetoric in this comment section is notable because it was not present in the *Nefarious* film. The film was highly critical of Cambodian parents, portraying them as irresponsible, immoral, and greedy, but stopped short of demonizing them or the nation as a whole. The anti-Cambodian rhetoric in the comments often demonized Cambodian culture as being beyond the point of saving, as demonstrated in the following comments:

Sadly, this has been going on for decades.... Also sadly nothing will change, it's their culture and no matter what or how well meaning westerners try It will be difficult to change.... (Nolot 2020a).

So basically everybody in Cambodia is mentally ill. This is a case were everybody is selling their daughters, that is a horrible thing, but since everybody is doing it makes them think is basically ok. And all these parents lived like this as well so it seems natural to them. If there are so many girls like this, imagine the amount of clients... crazy crazy crazy (ibid.).

Great eye opener for anyone that thinks that cultural superiority doesn't exist (ibid.).

Figure 8. Suggested Remedies in Comments on *Nefarious* and *Buying Children in Cambodia* (Excerpt)



Source: Author.

Remedies for Sex Trafficking Suggested by the Audience: While the film only presents its proposed remedy to the problem at the end of the film, the transfer of that remedy to the audience was successful. In the comments on the whole film and the excerpt, Christianity and God as a remedy to the problem of sex trafficking was the most suggested remedy, followed by conversion to Christianity. The suggested remedy for sex trafficking that emerged in third place in comments on the full film was violence (see Figure 8).

Commenters suggested a variety of violent remedies to achieve justice for the perpetrators. A sampling of the violent remedies suggested by the audience included arming victims with guns, the death penalty for perpetrators, everlasting torment in hell, and vigilante killing of parents who sold their children. As one commenter posited, “To sell your own child is beyond my understanding. Kill parents like that without the mercy” (Nolot 2020b). Another commenter argued, “All of these ‘people’ buying these girls deserve the brazen bull” (ibid.). The emergence of violence as a proposed remedy by the audience is a notable outcome because the film does not advocate for violence at any point.

While the audience frequently invoked violence as a remedy in the comments, the first and second most common remedies suggest that the film’s framing of Christianity and conversion to Christianity as remedies was effectively transferred to the audience. The audience’s understanding of evil as the primary cause of human trafficking explains the emergence of Christianity and conversion to Christianity as the accepted remedy for the problem.

Discussion

Why Is the Film's Framing of Sex Trafficking Compelling?

The framing of sex trafficking in the three films is compelling because it aligns with deeply held beliefs, prejudices, and mythologies. The framing in *Nefarious* and *Finding Home* creates parallel and mutually reinforcing symbolic convergences related to a Christian worldview and colonial attitudes, prejudices, and myths. While *The Storm Makers* avoids celebrating Christian beliefs or solutions to the problem, it utilizes colonial ideologies to demonize Cambodian parents and undermine the legitimacy of Cambodian Christianity.

The framing of sex trafficking in Cambodia in *Nefarious* and *Finding Home* is especially compelling to a specific Christian audience due to its alignment with a Christian worldview and the skillful, dramatized narratives crafted by the producers and directors. The definition of the problem in the section of *Nefarious* focused on Cambodia and in *Finding Home*—child sex trafficking—aligns with one of the most salient human trafficking narratives, which is the narrative of the perfect, virginal female victim (Baker 2013; Weitzer 2007). The directors' inclusion of compelling Christian characters readily identifiable as the hero and the films' use of Christian redemption stories create optimal conditions for a symbolic convergence in the audience. The stories told by the protagonist NGO leader in the Cambodia-focused section of *Nefarious* are graphic and traumatizing, heightening the emotional vulnerability of the audience and driving demand for a diagnosis of the cause. *Nefarious* delivers a compelling assessment that answers the questions that automatically enter a person's mind when they hear about crimes perpetrated against children, "Where were their parents?" and "Why didn't the parents protect their children?" The film's diagnosis that the cause of the problem is not just perpetrators but that Cambodian parents are also complicit in their children's suffering drives an intense emotional response in the audience. Furthermore, after dropping the emotional bomb that Cambodian parents are complicit in trafficking their daughters, the film adds to the emotional intensity with the claim that eighty to ninety percent of Cambodian parents are selling their daughters for sex.

Similarly, *Finding Home* is a white savior (Willuweit 2020) anthem that establishes clear Christian heroes and Cambodian victims through visualizations and rhetoric that elevate the status of white foreigners and diminish the perceived value of Cambodian survivors and other Cambodians. *Finding Home* uses filming locations, supporting footage, and the environments around the subject to establish a hierarchy of culture and value. The NGO director, Stephanie Freed, is interviewed in a beautiful studio environment, while the women she has saved from trafficking are mostly interviewed and portrayed in situations of extreme poverty. Additionally, the film uses a considerable amount of footage showing Buddhist temples, statues, and religious practices while discussing

the challenges Cambodia faces with sex trafficking. Survivors of trafficking are shown among the ruins of Angkor Wat, Cambodia's famous UNESCO Heritage site, in ways that highlight their insignificance and vulnerability and symbolize the oppressive power of Cambodian culture in their lives. After one series of scenes from Buddhist temples, the NGO director, Stephanie Freed, returns to the screen and indicates that Buddhism as a religion makes people vulnerable to human trafficking: "The Cambodian people primarily practice Buddhism as their religion... It's just really ingrained in the culture. Traffickers know this, and they use some of the very integral pieces of the Buddhist faith to really coerce and manipulate the girls into staying in these horrific trafficking situations" (Hammeke and Rapha House 2014, 21:30).

At the end of *Nefarious*, the audience's need for resolution (McAdams and Jones 2017) is met by the suggested remedy—the redemption of sinners through conversion to Christianity. The film's use of the song "How He Loves" (Passion Music 2015), a song commonly used in altar calls at churches, calling for sinners to repent and turn to Jesus, catalyzes an emotional and spiritual symbolic convergence for Christian audiences that solidifies the validity of Christianity as a remedy. Redemption stories establish who is or was evil and what groups or beliefs are good, legitimating and reinforcing a hierarchy of value. The emergence of Christianity as the most popular remedy in the comments confirms the successful delivery of the film's message.

While *Nefarious* and *Finding Home* appeal to the audiences' sense of superiority by comparing Christian foreigners to Cambodians, *The Storm Makers* uses a straightforward portrayal of poor Cambodian families and survivors as backward and lacking moral character. Each character exhibits serious moral failings that are detrimental to the audience's perception of their value. This storytelling is compelling because of the main character, Aya's, story. Aya spends most of the film as the apparent victim betrayed by her parents, who is unloved, isolated, and alone. The film sets her up as a potential Cinderella story, but Aya's stunning revelation of her monstrous abuse of her son at the end of the film leaves viewers without hope and a deeply damaged perception of Cambodian humanity.

How do the Films' Portrayals of Sex Trafficking in Cambodia Affect Audience Perceptions of Cambodian Parents and Cambodian Culture?

Anti-trafficking advocacy films like *Nefarious*, *Finding Home*, and *The Storm Makers* all share a similar purpose. They aspire to motivate people to intervene on behalf of those they see as most vulnerable. To accomplish this, each of these films establishes the need for external intervention by framing the Cambodian people as unable to solve the problem. Cambodian parents are portrayed as incapable of protecting their daughters and, in most cases, complicit in their trafficking and suffering. *Nefarious* and *Finding Home* both blame sex trafficking in Cambodia on moral and cultural failings, while *The Storm Makers* and *Nefarious* portray

Cambodian parents as under-evolved sociopaths incapable of morality, who would, and do, sell their young daughters to monsters for a luxury item at best and a small amount of food at worst.

In his book *The Wretched of the Earth*, Franz Fanon (2004) details the underlying beliefs, perceptions, and myths about cultural differences and values that explain the cultural and colonial foundations of the framing of sex trafficking in these films:

Native society is not simply described as a society lacking in values. It is not enough for the colonialist to affirm that those values have disappeared from, or still better, never existed in the colonial world. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this case, he is absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers, the unconscious and irretrievable instrument of blind forces. ... The customs of the colonized people, their tradition, their myths—above all their myths—are the very sign of that poverty of spirit and of their constitutional depravity (ibid., 41-42).

The Christian narratives that dominate the conclusion of *Nefarious* and appear repeatedly throughout *Finding Home* contain elements of cultural superiority that align with the above quote from Fanon. Johan Galtung (Galtung and Fischer 2013) identifies the transcendentalism present in Christianity as a core example of cultural violence where people from theistic religions whose deity is transcendental to this world, who acquire wealth, influence, and power are perceived to be more holy and closer to God than those who are trapped in poverty. The extension of this transcendental interpretation of earthly fortunes is that life on earth can be understood to be a representation of heaven and hell, a “foretaste or indication” of what is to come in the afterlife (ibid., 49). Both *Nefarious* and *Finding Home* prominently flaunt the wealth, comfort, and influence of the Western Christian benefactors, who are close enough to God to be directly called by Him to go to Cambodia and save victims of sex trafficking. Additionally, *The Storm Makers* repeatedly highlights the human trafficker’s use of his Christianity as proof of his direct connection to God and his inability to tell a lie (Suon 2014). While the film exposes his use of Christianity as a prop, the inclusion of this narrative highlights the existence and acceptance of this religious mythology of moral superiority among the poor working-class Cambodians portrayed in the film.

Like Fanon’s description of colonial beliefs and values, Edward Said’s description of colonial attitudes and perceptions of the value of the other in his book *Orientalism* (Said, 1979) also provides excellent context for the films’ portrayals of Cambodian parents and Cambodian culture:

Along with all other peoples variously designated as backward, degenerate, uncivilized, and retarded, the Orientals were viewed in a framework constructed out of biological determinism and moral-political admonishment. The oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having a quality best described as lamentably alien (ibid., 207).

Additionally, to illustrate how colonial attitudes and beliefs can enable people to overlook the humanity of others, Said poignantly invokes this quote from George Orwell, who, while traveling in Morocco, described the plight of colonial subjects and the dismissal of their human value and dignity under colonial rule:

When you walk through a town like this - two hundred thousand inhabitants, of whom at least twenty thousand own literally nothing except the rags they stand up in - When you see how the people live and still more how easily they die, it is always difficult to believe that you are walking among human beings. ... They arise out of the earth, they sweat, and starve for a few years, and then they sink back into the nameless mounds of the graveyard, and nobody notices that they are gone. And even the graves themselves soon fade back into the soil (ibid., 251-2).

Said's description of this colonial mindset is brought to life by *The Storm Makers'* use of an affluent and influential trafficker who introduces poor Cambodian parents as "backward people" who cannot "dress properly" or "do their own laundry" (Suon 2014, 10:40-10:48) This description of poor Cambodians, reinforces colonial stereotypes and prejudices and legitimates the negative portrayals of Cambodian survivors and parents.

The moral judgments and anti-Cambodian rhetoric identified in audience comments on *Nefarious* and *Buying Children in Cambodia* establish a clear us-versus-them dynamic that is a common outcome of symbolic convergences (Endres 2016). The samples of anti-Cambodian rhetoric in the findings above provide examples of dehumanizing and vilifying rhetoric from the audience toward Cambodia as a nation, Cambodians in general, and Cambodian parents.

The comment, "Great eye opener for anyone that thinks that cultural superiority doesn't exist" (Nolot 2020a), summarizes the tone of audience rhetoric towards Cambodian parents and the Cambodian people. It also demonstrates the audience's megalothymic perception of their value and worth compared to Cambodian parents and Cambodian people in general (Fukuyama 2018). The moral judgments emerging from the audience's comments demonstrate an unwillingness among many in the audience to recognize the Cambodian people and Cambodian parents as "just as good as everyone else" (ibid., 32).

Conclusion

The films *Nefarious: Merchant of Souls*, *Finding Home*, and *The Storm Makers* depict the cause of sex trafficking in Cambodia as moral and ethical depravity. Across the three films, sex trafficking in Cambodia is primarily depicted as the trafficking of young girls under the age of consent that results in their sexual exploitation at the hands of evil men. While the intention of the filmmakers for each of these films is noble and focused on raising awareness for the issue of sex trafficking and highlighting the challenges faced by survivors of sex trafficking, the film's depiction of Cambodian survivors, parents, and the Cambodian people, in general, is rooted in attitudes of cultural superiority, which significantly damage perceptions of the human value and dignified identity of Cambodian people. Additionally, the films' elevation of foreign NGO leaders and missionaries as affluent and powerful heroes, along with their promotion of Christianity as a solution to the moral problem of human trafficking, calls to mind Galtung's (Galtung and Fischer 2013, 49-52) discussion of the negative hierarchical implications of Christianity's transcendental theology, and its ideology of "chosenness" that quickly creates an outcast other.

Despite their good intentions, these films individually and collectively demonstrate the power of unintentional rhetoric and how unintentional rhetoric, especially in the form of mass media, can function as a delivery mechanism for messages of cultural violence. Their unconscious dissemination of culturally violent messages deeply damages the dignified human identity of Cambodian survivors, parents, and people, amounting to acts of rhetorical and cultural violence. The effects of this rhetorical and cultural violence can be seen in the audience's reactions to *Nefarious* and its excerpt, *Buying Children in Cambodia*, where a disinhibited portion of the audience adopts the unspoken message as truth and rebroadcasts it in the comment threads in a secondary act of rhetorical and cultural violence. The outcomes of this study indicate that the unintentional dissemination of culturally violent rhetoric by the films established a hierarchy of human value based on mythologies of cultural and religious superiority and a dehumanized understanding of the other. These messages had an unintended yet devastating impact on the audience's perception of the Cambodian people. This diminishing of the perceived value of Cambodian survivors, parents, and people has the potential to impact their ability to access rights, opportunities, and social standing that are equal to those accessible to everyone else.

This outcome generates a significant question: How can creators of mass media products, like the producers of *Nefarious*, *Finding Home*, and *The Storm Makers*, reduce the chances of triggering symbolic convergences that result in rhetorical and cultural violence outcomes like those outlined in this study? In response, the author of this article makes the following recommendations.

First, avoid negative portrayals of cultures and groups of people. Negative

portrayals of cultures and groups based on their actions, beliefs, and cultural norms exacerbate natural divisions between groups and enhance the emotional nature of us-versus-them narratives. These narratives and the negative framing of groups and cultures should be avoided to prevent the adoption of negative stereotypes and stigmas that can dehumanize people and legitimize conflict and violence, resulting in social, economic, and political exclusion.

Second, avoid legitimizing opinions and perspectives with religious rhetoric. Religious traditions have deep histories and internal divisions that make it difficult to predict how a targeted religious audience will respond to a particular framing of an issue. As demonstrated by *Nefarious*, it is possible to frame a topic in a way that primes the audience for action, presents a peaceful solution, and still triggers a dehumanizing, culturally violent reaction in the audience. The combination of negative portrayals and religious solutions is dangerous, given the deep histories of violent conflict in most major religions.

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