

***Combating Labor Trafficking With Design:
Utilizing Storytelling, Collaboration, and Cultural Relevance to Raise Awareness***

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Abstract

This paper discusses a collaboration among a non-profit organization, designers, and artists to create a labor trafficking awareness campaign. The project's purpose was to explore a new and effective approach to human trafficking awareness campaigns. By prioritizing empathy and information over stereotyping, sensationalism, and over-simplification—the campaign aimed to convey the complexity of labor trafficking, provide practical information on identifying signs, and educate the public on victim rights. The campaign presented real-life survivor stories in the form of graphic novels supplemented with key points and summary text. The involvement of culturally relevant artists helped to ensure that the survivor stories were authentically and empathetically represented. This paper shares the project's purpose, process, challenges, and outcomes, as well as insights into the effectiveness of the methodology.

Keywords: Labor Trafficking, Graphic Novel, Awareness Campaigns, Visual Storytelling, Collaboration

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Introduction

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Human trafficking is a grave violation of human rights on a global scale; however, the public's lack of understanding and misconceptions about human trafficking often obscure the true nature of this issue, potentially resulting in victims unknowingly falling into trafficking situations and the public failing to identify trafficking when they see it. Therefore, there is a real need to raise awareness and understanding about this issue. In the past, human trafficking awareness campaigns in both print and digital forms have played a vital role in such efforts because they present narratives that shape public perception and inspire action. On the other hand, survivors, aid professionals, and scholars have expressed concerns or dissatisfactions about how some campaigns depict human trafficking and those who suffer from it. They pointed to instances where those campaigns have misrepresented the issue which potentially harmed victims by perpetuating stereotypes, sensationalizing stories, and oversimplifying events (Hoyle et al., 2011; O'Brien 2013).

In 2022, one of the authors of this article, Stephen Zhang, and Mosaic Family Services initiated a collaboration to explore an alternative approach to human trafficking awareness campaigns that would present realistic and nuanced information. They also invited three graphic novel artists to collaborate with. The campaign focused on labor trafficking because it is a form of human trafficking that has received far less attention from both the media and awareness campaigns than sex trafficking. Adopting methodologies such as narrative inquiry, phenomenology, and visual storytelling, the team created a campaign that featured stories of real survivors. Utilizing the format of the graphic novel, this campaign presented information in a way that was realistic, relatable, and educational.

Misconceptions About Human Trafficking

The US Department of State (DOS) (n.d.) defines human trafficking, also called trafficking in persons, as the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain forms of labor or commercial sex acts. DOS identifies three elements of human trafficking: (a) "Acts," which means the trafficker recruits, harbors, transports, provides, obtains, or patronizes a person for labor or sex services; (b) "Means," which indicates a trafficker's use of force, fraud, or coercion, which may include threats of force, debt manipulation, withholding of pay, confiscation of identification documents, psychological coercion, reputational harm, manipulation of addictive substances, or threats to other people; and (3) "Purpose," which is about the perpetrator's goal to exploit a person's labor or services.

Human traffickers take advantage of vulnerable people, such as those facing psychological or emotional issues, economic hardships, natural disasters, or political instability. Traffickers use various tactics such as violence, manipulation, or false promises of well-paying jobs or romantic relationships to lure and control victims. Many industries across the globe engage in human trafficking, and traffickers commit their crimes in a variety of sectors. Some of the most common places to find humans being trafficked are agricultural fields, factories, restaurants, hotels, massage parlors, retail stores, fishing vessels, mines, private homes, and drug trafficking operations (DOS, n.d.).

According to Rister (2020), the public has many misconceptions about human trafficking. For instance, people often equate human trafficking with sex trafficking and neglect the fact that human trafficking also includes labor trafficking. This confusion is largely due to the media and awareness campaigns, which persistently focus on sex trafficking. The stories that garner attention often involve forced sexual exploitation, which captures public interest and sympathy; however, the reality is much more complex than this perception. Human trafficking is widely considered a hidden global crime, and the number of cases varies drastically among surveys (McDonald, 2014). Nevertheless, research has indicated that labor trafficking is at least as serious a crime as sex trafficking, occurring behind the closed doors of industries and workplaces worldwide (Al-Tammemi et al., 2023). A report by International Labour Organization (ILO), Walk Free, and International Organization for Migration (IOM) states that there are 17.3 million privately imposed forced labors worldwide and 6.3 million forced commercial sexual exploitations (ILO et al., 2022).

In addition, people often confuse human trafficking with human smuggling: two distinctively different concepts. Smuggling involves the illegal transportation of individuals across national borders with their consent; whereas, trafficking doesn't necessarily require the physical movement of a person and can occur where victims live. Additionally, while victims of human trafficking may have initially had an agreement with their traffickers, exploitation and coercion nullify any idea of the victim giving and maintaining consent (Hoyle et al., 2011).

The public holds many misconceptions about the key elements of human trafficking. The three primary misconceptions are (a) who can be a victim, (b) who can be a perpetrator, and (c) the how challenging it can be to escape. First, people tend to believe that only undocumented people from impoverished countries are trafficked into affluent nations, such as the US. In reality, citizens from both wealthy and poor countries, regardless of their legal status, can fall victim to trafficking. Similarly, people assume that only women and girls are victims of human trafficking, partly due to the greater awareness of sex trafficking; however, the reality is that both men and women can be trafficked into both labor and sex trafficking. LGBTQ+ boys and young men are particularly vulnerable to human trafficking (Hoyle et al., 2011).

Second, many in the public assume that human traffickers are strangers to their victims; however, the reality is that traffickers can be strangers, acquaintances, family members, relatives, business recruiters, or romantic partners.

Finally, people assume that victims can easily escape their situations and seek help. Since many human trafficking victims work in environments without barricades such as farms, construction sites, or their own homes, the public assumes escape should be easy; however, the reality is far more complicated. Many victims are trafficked to unfamiliar geographic and cultural environments, which leaves them with no means of travel. Moreover, human trafficking is about not only physical constraints but also psychological coercion. Traffickers manipulate victims into believing they are dependent on them, using fears related to things such as deportation, financial obligations, lack of support networks, not being believed by others, and more severe punishments to prevent victims from breaking free (Hoyle et al., 2011).

Problems With Past Awareness Campaigns

Because of the widespread misconceptions about human trafficking, there has always been a pressing need to raise awareness. One effective tool for achieving this goal has been awareness campaigns. Over the past decades, numerous human trafficking awareness campaigns have been launched. These campaigns have played a crucial role as the front door of the anti-trafficking movement, drawing the public's attention and inspiring them to care and act. Additionally, the campaigns serve as vital sources of narrative that help the public and decision-makers define the problem of trafficking (O'Brien, 2015). Despite the important role these campaigns serve, however, human trafficking victims and their advocates, such as non-profit organizations and scholars, have voiced their concerns with some awareness campaigns. (O'Brien, 2015; Savoia et al., 2023). They have pointed out that they have contained mistakes, provided unrealistic information, and some may have even harmed victims. These mistakes include:

- **Perpetuating Stereotypes**—One of the frequent complaints about human trafficking campaigns is victim stereotyping, where campaigns depict “ideal victims” as impoverished, weak, mostly women or girls, and helpless. The frequency of these depictions results in the exclusion of other victims from the narrative and forms hierarchies among victims in people's minds. As a result, these campaigns can create obstacles for fair treatment of victims who are not what the criminal justice system, non-government organizations (NGOs), and the healthcare system see as “ideal” (O'Brien, 2013; Rister, 2020, Savoia et al., 2023).
- **Sensationalism**—Another common mistake awareness campaigns make is sensationalizing the victim's miseries through images of imprisonment, pain, and fear. This approach fails to convey the complexity of human trafficking and misrepresents the true nature of the issue. While physical abuse and captivity are part of human trafficking, other forms of exploitation—including psychological coercion, debt bondage, and manipulation—are also broadly used by traffickers. These subtler, yet equally damaging, aspects of human trafficking are often unrepresented when campaigns focus on solely dramatic images. By sensationalizing the victims' physical suffering, the campaigns make it difficult for the audience to recognize the emotional and psychological traumas that are not visible (O'Brien, 2013; Savoia et al., 2023).
- **Over-simplification**—Another concern raised about awareness campaigns is their tendency to oversimplify. Such oversimplification could be due to space limitations—such as occur with posters, ad banners, and billboards—or the desire to cut through noise. These campaigns condense human trafficking situations into taglines, short videos, or one image, which potentially perpetuates stereotypes, racial bias, or sexism (O'Brien, 2013; Savoia et al., 2023).

Our Solution - The Be Aware Campaign

To address the issues with human trafficking campaigns, one of the authors of this article, Stephen Zhang, collaborated with Mosaic Family Services to initiate a project aimed at exploring an alternative and more effective approach. Additionally, they invited three artists to join the collaboration. Mosaic Family Services is a nonprofit organization based in Dallas, Texas, dedicated to assisting survivors of human rights abuses. Their clients include trafficking survivors, family violence survivors, refugees, and unaccompanied minors.

Mosaic Family Services provides a comprehensive range of services, and they intended to utilize the campaign's results—brochures and web pages—in their outreach activities.

This team decided to create a human trafficking awareness campaign with a specific focus on labor trafficking because historically, labor trafficking has received far less attention than sex trafficking from the government, law enforcement, news media, anti-trafficking NGOs, and awareness campaigns—despite being an equally grave violation of human rights (ILO et al., 2022). Several factors contribute to the lack of attention paid to labor trafficking. Not only is labor trafficking challenging to detect, but also it lacks the sensationalism that captures the public's attention. Additionally, labor trafficking often involves businesses and industries that hold significant economic and political influence (Nagle, 2019).

The objectives of our project were to innovate a new and more effective approach to awareness campaigns, to provide realistic and nuanced information about labor trafficking, and to portray survivors with respect. The target audiences were defined as follows:

- Potential Victims—In some cases, victims of labor trafficking may not be aware that they are in a trafficking situation and that they have rights.
- Coworkers of Victims—Individuals working in industries such as the service sector and worksites may encounter trafficking situations within their workplaces. It is vital that these coworkers are informed and vigilant.
- Support Personnel—Individuals involved in helping survivors (such as law enforcement personnel or employees of NGOs, like Mosaic Family Services) may have misconceptions about labor trafficking that need to be dispelled.

The team adopted three methodologies aimed at generating a new approach to human trafficking awareness campaigns.

- Visual storytelling—The campaign chose to employ visual storytelling because storytelling is an effective communication method that is tangible, emotionally rich, and memorable. Stories promote empathy by enabling individuals to “walk in someone else's shoes.” Moreover, humans learn, retain, and comprehend information more effectively when it is presented in a multimedia format, incorporating sound and visuals, rather than solely in textual form (Mirkovski et al., 2019).
- Narrative inquiry—The campaign chose to employ narrative inquiry because it involves the study of stories and narratives and determines what information to share with people to gain a deeper understanding of the meaning of human experiences. According to Kim (2015), “Narrative inquiry utilizes an interdisciplinary interpretive lens with theoretically and philosophically diverse approaches and methods, all centered around the narratives and stories of research participants” (p. 6). Instead of relying on oversimplified one-liners and stereotypical images, we opted to delve into the lived experiences of survivors and share their stories.
- Phenomenology—On a more epistemological level, the fundamental methodology in this study is phenomenology. Phenomenology is a philosophical and research methodology that explores the lived experience of human beings. According to Merleau-Ponty (1945/2012), “Phenomenology is also a philosophy that places

essences back within existence and thinks that the only way to understand man and the world is by beginning from their ‘facticity’” (p. lxx). The phenomenological method is employed to help researchers understand people’s lived experiences and gain insight into the true nature of their lives. Phenomenology is widely applied in many fields, and it overlaps with qualitative methods to explore human experiences and perspectives. By focusing on individual experiences, phenomenology allows researchers to uncover rich and nuanced insights into the human condition. It is particularly useful when studying complex and subjective phenomena such as emotions, perceptions, consciousnesses, and cultural practices that are hard to capture in quantitative studies. We employed the phenomenological method to help us understand the lived experiences of people and gain insight into what their lives truly entail.

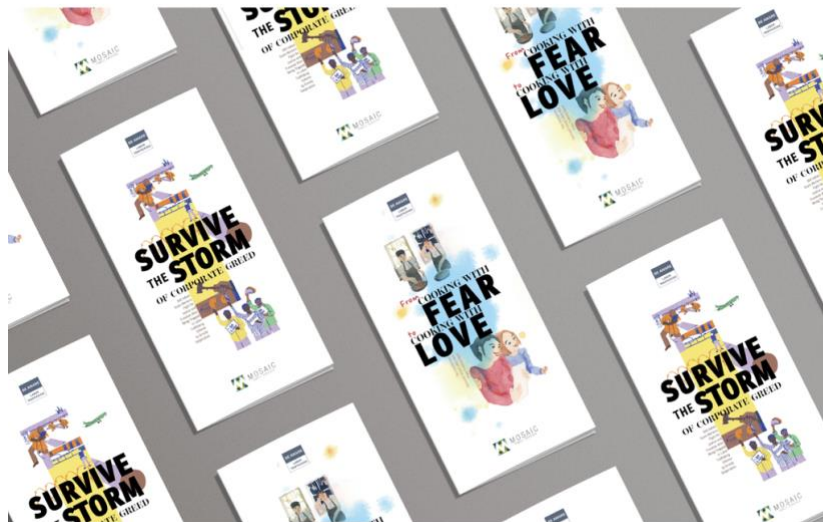
Guided by a phenomenological methodology, our goal was to create a narrative that was complex, realistic, and relatable. Through visual storytelling in graphic novels, we aimed to depict the living conditions of these individuals and help the public understand the concerns related to labor trafficking. Using these methodologies, the team adopted the following creative tactics in the campaign development process.

- Telling stories of actual survivors—Since every victim’s experience is different (Savoia et al., 2023), the team rejected the idea of fictionalizing the stories to avoid unintentional bias or stereotyping. Instead, we identified three real-life stories, each representing a different type of labor trafficking situation. All the stories were from people who received assistance from Mosaic Family Services. As such, the stories were already verified; however, we changed the survivor’s names or made them anonymous to protect their identities. In these stories, we presented the important stages of human trafficking, including how victims were recruited through coercion or deception; how they were manipulated through fraud, violence, or abuse; how they escaped the trafficking situation; and how they ultimately settled in the US or returned to their home countries. Through these descriptions, we aimed to educate the target audiences about alarming signs and available options at every stage of human trafficking. We particularly believed that discussing the escape and settlement stages was as crucial as the recruitment and abuse stages because many victims are often unaware of their rights and their options for escaping such situations. (Nagle, 2019). The stories we told were:
 - “From Cooking With Fear to Cooking With Love”—This is the story of two women from Thailand who were enticed to come to the US and work in a restaurant. The situation quickly became exploitative, and their passports were confiscated by the restaurant owner.
 - “Survive the Storm of Corporate Greed”—This is a story that spotlights the situation of 500 welders and pipe fitters from India who were recruited by a US corporation and illegally forced to pay exorbitant fees to the recruiter in India. Soon after arriving in the United States with legal work visas, the workers were confronted with a grim reality of exploitation and abuse. The situation grew so dire that one worker attempted suicide. With the help of a coalition led by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the workers fought the company, which resulted in its bankruptcy.
 - “12 Years and Two Countries”—This story revolves around four sisters in Mexico, 6-11 years old, in a helpless family situation, who were taken under the wing of a seemingly sympathetic family friend. Soon after, the girls were

coerced into working for this individual in Mexico and the US for 14 years, enduring inhumane physical and psychological abuses.

- Adopting graphic novels to tell stories—Graphic novels are a popular and highly-effective medium for conveying stories with rich content that emotionally resonate with people. A study conducted by Cohen et al. (2020) found that reading graphic novels, as opposed to text-only stories, led to an increase in both imagery fluency (the ease with which readers could visualize story events) and narrative engagement. Due to a broad range of visual and narrative styles, contemporary graphic novels can appeal to a broad range of audiences from children to adults.
- Utilizing legends to educate—In addition to using graphic novels to depict the survivors' lived experiences and connect emotionally with the target audiences, the team decided to incorporate legends in the brochures and on the webpages. These legends highlight key elements in the stories, with each point in the legend corresponding to a specific panel in the graphic novel. These legends provide essential information about the signs of labor trafficking, legal infringements, or victims' rights depicted in a particular panel. By offering concrete information, the legends complement the visual storytelling in the graphic novels, facilitating a deeper understanding of the issue.

Figure 1: *The Be Aware Campaign brochure covers*



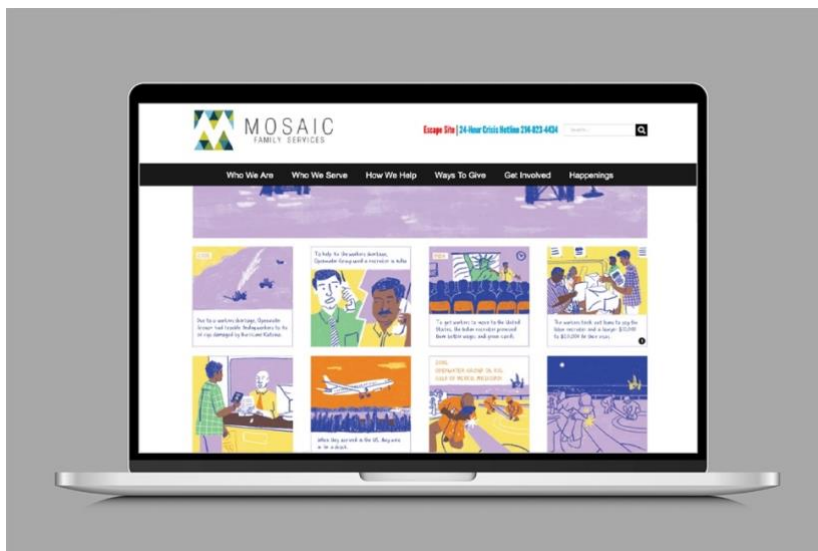
Note: The brochure covers were designed by Stephen Zhang and illustrated by Shreyas R. Krishnan and Kaori Tsuchimoto.

Figure 2: *The Be Aware Campaign brochure covers and inside panels*



Note: The brochures were designed by Stephen Zhang and illustrated by Shreyas R. Krishnan and Kaori Tsuchimoto.

Figure 3: *The Be Aware Campaign webpage*



Note: The website was designed by Mosaic Family Services and illustrated by Shreyas R Krishnan and Kaori Tsuchimoto.

Once the brochures and webpages were completed, the Be Aware Campaign was launched to support Mosaic Family Services' messaging during Human Trafficking Prevention Month in 2023. The final campaign comprised two brochures, each featuring one story; dedicated webpages on Mosaic's website; and a series of social media posts. One of the three original stories was excluded because the survivors chose a different plan to tell their story. Beyond its goal of supporting Mosaic's programming, this campaign served as an experimental project, exploring alternative approaches to human trafficking awareness campaigns through visual storytelling, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology.

Conclusion

Throughout this process, our team learned that narratives based on survivors' lived experiences provide a tangible and reliable foundation for human trafficking awareness campaigns because they offer credible context and depth, which makes the storytelling convincing. We also discovered that the graphic novel is a promising format in social design because it can effectively convey complex facts, contextual information, and emotional depth.

Having incorporated the campaign materials into their daily operations, Mosaic Family Services provided valuable feedback. The most noteworthy observation was that the graphic novel format was particularly effective for communicating in multilingual settings or situations with varying literacy levels. This feedback indicates the effectiveness of the methodologies adopted in this project, especially narrative inquiry and visual storytelling.

In this collaboration, team members brought expertise in various fields, including human trafficking, survivor services, creative strategy, graphic novels illustration, and design to create a well-rounded and balanced team. It became evident that the team's collective efforts exceeded the sum of its individual contributions. Collaborating with like-minded and culturally relevant artists is particularly important and effective for social design. Such collaborations bring diverse knowledge, cultural backgrounds, and empathy to the project.

The Be Aware Campaign not only supports Mosaic Family Services' operations but also was an innovative experiment aimed at establishing alternative approaches to human trafficking awareness campaigns. The collaboration sought to present a narrative that is both realistic and nuanced, making it more relatable to the audiences. It demonstrated the effectiveness of innovative methodologies and the importance of an inclusive and culturally sensitive approach.

The results of the project demonstrated the value of using visual storytelling, narrative inquiry, and phenomenology in human trafficking awareness campaigns. The stories of survivors, rooted in their lived experiences, provided the campaign with authenticity and depth. The graphic novel format presented a promising model for visual storytelling to convey complex information and evoke emotional depth in social design.

Through shared experiences, insights, and creative efforts from diverse professionals, this campaign has not only broadened our understanding of the issue but also paved the way toward a more empathetic and impactful advocacy. The Be Aware Campaign has introduced an alternative approach to reimagining awareness campaigns and can serve as a blueprint for continued exploration to better communicate the multifaceted nature of human trafficking.

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