

case study

Combating Human Trafficking: Concerns with Digital Keys in a Hotel

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Introduction

Human trafficking is “modern-day slavery and involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act” (Homeland Security, n.d.). It can happen anywhere, from metropolitan cities to a victim’s own community in every country. Anybody can be a victim of human trafficking. Traffickers target people who are vulnerable for a variety of reasons, including emotional instability, lack of social support from their immediate family, and economic challenges (Homeland Security, n.d.).

Traffickers utilize hospitality businesses and tourism attractions as a means and venue for this illegal activity due to the privacy and anonymity afforded when consuming hospitality and tourism products. In addition, seasonality, one of the industry characteristics, also opens the opportunity for traffickers, particularly for labor trafficking due to the high demand for short-term temporary workers. While human trafficking occurs at a variety of hospitality and tourism businesses, including theme parks, cruise ships, and sporting events, hotels and motels are easy and attractive venues for traffickers (Polaris, n.d.).

This case study discusses the possible situations of human trafficking, particularly sex trafficking in the hotel industry. Thus, this study provides an opportunity to increase awareness of human trafficking by sharing information about signals of human trafficking and providing a proper response to these situations. Hotel employees play an important role in combating human trafficking since they are the eyes to recognize the signals on the scene in their workplace. Research indicates that a lack of employee training makes the hotel susceptible to all types of human trafficking (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018). It is more difficult for employees to recognize the signals because of the reduced interaction with guests due to the adoption of digital keys. This case study also addresses the concern of the use of digital keys, a representation of customer engagement technology in fighting against illegal activity.

Background

Hotel industry fighting against human trafficking

Human trafficking is defined as “modern-day slavery and involves the use of force, fraud, or coercion to obtain some type of labor or commercial sex act” (Homeland Security, n.d.). It is reported that human trafficking is a multi-billion-dollar criminal industry (Polaris, n.d.) and is the second most profitable form of transnational crime, followed by drug trafficking (Homeland Security, n.d.). Approximately, 24.9 million people around the world have suffered from human trafficking (Polaris, n.d.).

Sex trafficking and labor trafficking are a major form of this illegal activity in the hospitality industry (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018). Sex trafficking is defined as “a crime committed when a trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to perform commercial sex acts” (Homeland Security, n.d.). According to the statistics provided by Polaris, more than 34,000 sex trafficking cases were reported to the National Human Trafficking Hotline between 2007 and 2017. Moreover, it is estimated that approximately 4.8 million people are victims of sex trafficking globally (Polaris, n.d.). Labor trafficking indicates “a crime committed when a trafficker uses force, fraud, or coercion to compel another person to work for little or no wages” (Homeland Security, n.d.). For the past 12 years, the National Human Trafficking Hotline received 7,800 labor trafficking cases in the United States (Polaris, n.d.).

Human trafficking can occur anywhere, and legislations vary across states and countries to fight against human trafficking. The United States has established multiple legislations regarding human trafficking. The Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 defines human trafficking and related offenses as federal crimes and contains several methods to prosecute perpetrators, protect victims and survivors, and prevent human trafficking through monitoring (Polaris, n.d.). In addition, under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2003, victims can sue the traffickers, and the Act also protects victims and families from deportation (Polaris, n.d.). It is mandatory to provide information related to human trafficking for people who apply for work- and education-based visas under the Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act of 2008 (Polaris, n.d.). Further information regarding the current federal laws can be found at <https://polarisproject.org/current-federal-laws>.

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Hotels are an attractive venue for traffickers to exploit the victims since they take advantage of the privacy and anonymity provided during their stay at hotels (Homeland Security, n.d.b). Thus, hotels offer means and opportunity for traffickers (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018). Hotel rooms often are used as a place for the encounter between victims of sex trafficking and those people who are purchasing sex. In addition, victims of labor trafficking are forced to work for hotels or any type of business in the supply chain of its product. Human trafficking puts a great risk on every entity involved in the hotel industry, including customers, employees, and hotel businesses (American Hotel & Lodging Association, n.d.).

Research acknowledges that increasing awareness of human trafficking among frontlines employees at different operational functions and creating an anti-trafficking culture within hospitality organizations are a great starting point to fight against this illegal activity (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018). The hotel industry has been aggressively fighting against human trafficking by increasing the awareness of the issue among employees, guests, and management. The American Hotel and Lodging Association (AHLA) launched a new campaign, "No room for trafficking" to increase awareness of human trafficking and make collective efforts to combat human trafficking by sharing the best practices and developing training programs in the industry. In addition to implementing trainings to increase awareness and identify signals in daily hospitality operations, recommended supports and commitments include donating reward points for lodging support for victims and survivors (AHLA, 2019). Major hotel groups have released statements on modern slavery and human trafficking (e.g., Accor, Hilton, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts) to show their commitment to combat human trafficking. Their commitment is not only among their employees and on their physical properties but also includes partners in their supply chains. Suppliers are asked to fulfill the expectations regarding forced labor and child hiring practices. In addition, Marriott International trained 500,000 employees by launching a mandatory human trafficking awareness training program (Marriott International, 2019). The program aims to protect its employees and guests and better serve the society by enabling its employees to recognize signs of human trafficking in its hotels and understand how to respond to the suspicious behaviors of criminal activities (Marriott International, 2019).

The use of digital keys in the hotel industry

Guest engagement technology, such as digital keys, which particularly enables customers to navigate their experiences with a hotel on their own, increases the vulnerability of the hotel industry in human trafficking (Paraskevas & Brookes, 2018). Major hotel brands, such as Hilton and Marriot, allow their member guests to use digital keys embedded in their mobile apps upon guests' arrival without going to the front desks. Digital keys have been in place in roughly 65% of Hilton's total properties (OpenKey, 2018). It significantly reduces the waiting time at a front

desk and check-in/check-out times by enabling remote check-in before arrival and sending digital keys to guests' smartphones (OpenKey, n.d.). Increased automation, such as mobile check-ins/check-outs, in daily hotel operations promotes guests' privacy and anonymity, making hotels more vulnerable to human trafficking since it hinders hotel employees from recognizing guests' real identities and activities behind closed doors (Kim, 2019). The adoption of digital keys has been one of the significant trends in the hotel industry, including not only major chains but also independent hotels (Hertzfeld, 2018). Embracing this technology contributes in streamlining the process of customers' access to the various services provided by a hotel. For example, customers can directly access their rooms and other facilities, including the fitness center and parking garage, in a hotel with their digital keys. For Hilton hotel guests, they download the Hilton Honors app first, check in and select their room on their own on the app, and choose the digital key in the app. They simply need to push a button within the app to unlock the door when they are within a few steps with the door. It works through Bluetooth signals between a door lock and a guest's mobile phone (Hilton Honors, n.d.). Since check-in/check-out is completed by customers, employees also see the advantages of digital keys in terms of efficiency. They do not need to rush into simple tasks, such as check-in/check-out, so they can spend more time providing quality service to the guests (Hertzfeld, 2018). The use of digital keys in the hotel industry is expected to continue to grow in popularity (Lodging Magazine, 2019). It is reported that more than 80% of the properties in the mid-price or higher segments have already adopted the digital keys (Hospitality Technology, 2019). While the use of digital keys provides advantages to both the customers and employees of a hotel, it significantly reduces face-to-face interaction between two parties. Hotel employees have less opportunity to meet their guests and see who they are. Due to this fact, hotels become more vulnerable to illegal activity conducted in their establishment without being aware of it. Conversely, technology advancement could be beneficial in ending modern slavery. Researchers developed an app that identifies hotels where sexual trafficking might occur. It gathers photos of the interiors of more than 50,000 hotels worldwide and examines the possible venues of sexual trafficking by matching the photos of the hotels with those taken in hotel rooms and placed in online advertisements posted by traffickers. This is possible through artificial intelligence (Fields, 2019).

Case: The Baldwin Hotel - Manhattan, New York

The Baldwin Hotel, a new luxury hotel chain, was established by two brothers in 1994. From its initial location in Manhattan, New York, the Baldwin hotels have grown to eleven other locations in the United States as well as some locations overseas. The Baldwin Hotel in Manhattan has about 250 rooms and 15 penthouse suites. Throughout the years, the hotel brand has kept up with the times and has followed with the technological advances that have been introduced to the world. At this current time, the Baldwin brand has introduced an in-

novation that would allow guests to choose their preferred suites and check in without having to check in at the front desk.

The pros and cons of adopting digital keys in the hotel

Ever since the digital key feature has been introduced to the Baldwin Hotels, guests have raved over its convenience and the accessibility they have with their reservations. It is a great way to avoid long lines at the front desk counter, especially because it is in Manhattan where the lines are always lengthy. Utilizing just their smartphones, guests can use a digital key to skip the check-in procedure and gain instant access to their rooms once the rooms are ready. Additionally, a whole host of service requests can be made from anywhere in the hotel. For instance, a digital key can be used to ask for housekeeping, issue a 'do not disturb request,' or reserve a parking space at the hotel before arrival. Additionally, activities and amenities no longer need to be booked through the front desk. Offering this hassle-free alternative is something that can have a direct impact on levels of customer satisfaction. With this innovation, guests are more likely to rate their efficiency of arrival by 10% higher than those using traditional check-in.

The demands on a front desk agent to provide quick and friendly service are essential during busy check-in periods. But with more guests checking in themselves, this burden is relieved. The employees at the Baldwin Hotel agree that the digital key is very useful, mainly because it saves them from having to select rooms for guests and check them in. Due to the constant rush related to being in Manhattan, this feature is much appreciated. This new amenity, however, has significantly reduced employees' interactions with each guest. It becomes harder for employees to recognize each guest staying in the hotel. Ultimately, it gives more opportunity for human traffickers to make their infrastructure even more private without hotel employees being aware of their illegal activities.

Christine, the Front Desk Agent

Christine is a college student majoring in Hospitality Management in a university located in the Northeastern United States. As a front desk agent at the Baldwin Hotel, she assists with the operations at the front desk, which include guest check-in/check-out, collecting guest payment, responding to guest requests or complaints, and communicating with housekeeping and the bellman/concierge, to provide excellent customer service. Since Baldwin offers a digital key that allows their guests to check in through their mobile devices, Christine has been observing that many guests check in before arrival and skip the front desk check in. Since guests who use the digital key are frequent customers and must be registered members of the Baldwin Hotel, Christine can view the names of the guests arriving with the digital key and their room numbers. However, due to the reduced

interaction with each guest, Christine often feels that it is hard to recognize each guest's face.

Christine Notices Suspicious Activity

One day, while working at the front desk, Christine sees something suspicious in the hotel lobby. It is November 8, 2018 around 12 p.m., and a middle-aged man enters the Baldwin Hotel. He wears a nice business suit as other guests do in the hotel. He appears to digitally check himself into a room that has access to exits. He takes his luggage up to his room and then comes down to the lobby. He sits in the lobby and is continuously receiving and making calls from his cellphone. About one hour later, five young girls come through the main entrance. Christine notices that they are dressed inappropriately for their ages and for the weather. They are noticeable among the guests in the lobby due to their appearances. They take a seat next to the man who is now on his laptop. They look tired and do not move from their seats during the rest of Christine's shift, which lasts two hours. Christine is curious about them but decides not to do anything since the Baldwin Hotel is a luxury brand and thus she believes that nothing will happen.

The next day, Christine goes to the front desk, beginning her work at 2 p.m., and sees the gentleman sitting in the lobby. He puts three mobile phones on the table and is working on his laptop. This reminded her of the suspicious scene in the lobby yesterday. She decides to conduct a little investigation. She calls the bellman, Austin, and asks if he can remember the gentleman's name. Austin said his name is Mr. John Perez. Austin had had a brief interaction with him while parking his van yesterday. Since the height of the van would not fit into the hotel parking lot, he had to guide the guest to other commercial parking facilities near the hotel. Austin shared that he brought the girls in his van and is here for a model audition. Christine searches for Mr. John Perez in the reservation list and finds that he reserved multiple rooms under his name and checked in through digital keys. During her break, Christine ran into Angie, a housekeeper, in the employees' lounge, and she shared what she saw yesterday in the lobby. Angie recognized the guest with the girls and shared with Christine that she felt strange too. Angie said that the guest made a request for additional towels and new linens for multiple rooms when Angie was passing by in the hallway. But when Angie delivered the towels and new linens to the rooms, all of the rooms had "Do Not Disturb" signs on the door. Angie shared that she heard the staff at the bar were also suspicious about the girls since they were loitering in the bar until late at night.

Christine Intervenes

After the break, Christine thinks that she needs to do something since other staff also found the situation to be suspicious, but she is not sure where to start. She is not confident about calling the police immediately, talking to the girls, or confronting him directly. The girls do not make any eye contact and are never left alone in the lobby. She is

afraid that her actions may cause more trouble for the girls. What if she misunderstood it all? He might feel offended and complain to the hotel, which may cause a problem with Christine's job. Since he checked in with digital keys, he might be even annoyed by the fact that she knew his name and has been watching him. She decides to alert management of her suspicions first. She makes note of the date and time of the suspected incident and describes the appearance of those involved. Once she completes it, she sends her note to Craig, the front desk manager.

Craig's dilemma: Developing a long-term action plan to fight against human trafficking in the hotel

Craig receives the note from the front desk clerk. He is so relieved that Christine took an action to raise her voice in the matter she thinks is suspicious. Craig contacts the local police for further investigation. Craig is not sure whether other employees are aware of concerns of human trafficking and are able to report to management about suspicious activities on the property. The hotel has not been providing any training for employees or establishing any policies regarding human trafficking. Craig remembers the video he watched in one of conferences regarding AHLA's new campaign, "No room for trafficking." He searches the resources placed on the website (<https://www.ahla.com/issues/human-trafficking>). The action plan suggested by the campaign includes "a) training staff on what to look for and how to respond, b) displaying human trafficking indicator signage, c) establishing a company-wide policy, d) ongoing coordination with law enforcement, and e) sharing success stories and best practices" (American Hotel and Lodging Association, n.d., p.2). Craig decides to do research regarding specific implementation strategies under each plan and the resources needed before bringing the issues and making suggestions to upper management.

Dilemma/problems

The hotel industry is an easy and attractive venue for human traffickers due to the privacy and anonymity. Active adoption of guest engagement technology, such as digital keys, makes it even harder to recognize signals of this illegal activity since the technology eliminates the opportunity for interactions with a guest. Christine is a college student majoring in hospitality management and works for the Baldwin Hotel as a front desk agent. One day while working, she notices a middle-aged man enter the hotel who does not check in at the front desk. He sits at the lobby talking to a group of young girls. The girls look underdressed and tired. Christine think something is wrong with this situation. She knows that she should never confront the guests that she thinks are suspicious because it would put everyone at risk. Christine decides to document what she sees and take it to management, so it could be properly handled. While waiting for a response from Craig, Christine is wondering about what possible actions she can take and what indicators help staff to determine whether there is a possibility of human trafficking in the hotel. In addition, she starts to think about digital keys.

What if the guest had checked in at the front desk in person? Would that help make it easier to recognize the signals or problems earlier?

Discussion questions

The discussion questions are as follows.

- Why does the hotel industry care about combatting human trafficking? Why is it important that employees and managers in a hotel learn the signals of human trafficking and how to respond to these situations?
- What are the indicators signaling human trafficking in the case study?
- What are the ways to increase awareness of human trafficking among hotel employees and managers?
- What types of components should be included in the employee training sessions?
- Should hotels limit the use of digital keys for guests to limit the possibility of human trafficking?
- What are the ways of creating a safe environment for employees and guests while maintaining customer privacy?