

Modus Operandi of Transnational Online Gambling Syndicates in the Indonesia-Cambodia Region: Analysis in the Perspective of Transnationalism

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ABSTRACT

Transnational online gambling syndicates in Southeast Asia exploit digital platforms, regulatory gaps, and labor migration to operate across jurisdictions, with Indonesia-Cambodia as a critical nexus. This study examines the syndicates' modus operandi—recruitment, operational networks, and evasion tactics—through the lens of transnationalism, addressing gaps in state-centric crime analysis. A qualitative case study analyzes secondary data (2020–2025) from academic journals, UN reports, and media, triangulated for validity. Syndicates recruit via social media (Facebook, WhatsApp), exploit migrant labor in Cambodian SEZs, and leverage cryptocurrencies to evade detection. Their fluid networks adapt to law enforcement, highlighting the inadequacy of domestic legal frameworks. The study calls for cross-border collaboration among intelligence, financial, and migration agencies, alongside digital platform regulation, to dismantle these networks. It also urges further research on transnational crime's financial-digital dimensions and the efficacy of ASEAN cooperation.

Keywords: transnational crime; online gambling; non-state actors; modus operandi; transnationalism.

INTRODUCTION

Cross-border organized crime in the online gambling industry has grown rapidly and poses a serious threat to national and regional security (Perwira, 2019; Sulingo & Swarianata, 2023). Crime syndicates take advantage of differences in regulations between countries to operate in the "gray" zone of the law, for example by making Cambodia the base of operations of Indonesia's illegal online gambling industry. The impact is real: hundreds of Indonesian citizens were reported to be victims of exploitation and forced labor in online gambling operation centers in Cambodia during 2022 to 2024 (Kompas, 2023; (OHCHR, 2023). This phenomenon shows the increasing complexity of crimes that are no longer controlled by state actors (Dermawan, 2024; Langdale, 2024).

The development of information technology has also accelerated the transformation of crime syndicates (Peace, 2024; S. C. M. Post, 2024). The internet and social media are the main mediums used to recruit victims, hide operations, and distribute profits across countries. This mode has been confirmed by the UNODC report (2025) which states that cyber syndicates and online gambling now work through a dispersed and highly adaptive network pattern. This situation creates a major challenge for the law enforcement system that is still limited by national jurisdiction (N. Y. Post, 2024; Press, 2025).

The case between Indonesia and Cambodia shows how this crime works transnationally and systematically. Official data shows that more than a thousand Indonesian citizens have fallen victim to online gambling syndicates in Cambodia, recruited through job fraud and then forced to work under threats and violence (OHCHR, 2023) Tribata News, 2024). The majority of them depart non-procedurally using tourist visas and are recruited through digital channels such as Facebook and WhatsApp (Indonesia, 2024). This shows a structured and consistent pattern in recruitment and exploitation practices (Guo Wang et al., 2024; Times, 2025).

Departing from this background, this study analyzes the *modus operandi* of transnational organized crime syndicates in the online gambling industry in Southeast Asia, focusing on the cross-border dynamics between Indonesia and Cambodia. The theory of transnationalism is used as an analytical framework to understand how non-state actors form criminal networks that penetrate state borders and take advantage of legal loopholes. The main problem to be answered is how the structure, strategy, and adaptation of these syndicates are carried out in a cross-jurisdictional context, as well as the extent to which the state response is able to reach it. This research aims to fill a gap in previous studies that tend to be state-centric, and encourage a broader understanding of the forms of crime that are evolving with digital globalization.

The theory of Transnationalism in international relations emphasizes that non-state actors can have significant cross-border linkages, forming networks of interactions beyond the full control of governments (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020). Transnational organized crime is a concrete example of how criminal networks use global flows—both human, capital, and information—to carry out illegal operations in various jurisdictions. In the context of trafficking in persons, for example, victims are recruited in the country of origin and exploited in the destination country, thus involving two or more countries (Valerisella & Sahetapy, 2025). This theory is relevant for analyzing online gambling syndicates across Indonesia-Cambodia because it explains the dynamics of crime that penetrates national borders and the need for a response that is not only domestic but also international.

Previous studies have shown a close link between the advancement of digital technology and the transformation of transnational crime modes. Hamana et al. (2023) revealed that the sophistication of information technology is like "opening the door" to the online trafficking network, which makes it easier for perpetrators to recruit, control, and exploit victims remotely. Social media plays a central role as a means of recruitment: fictitious job advertisements are widely spread to attract potential victims without the need for face-to-face meetings (Sugiyono M., 2024). This finding is in line with the phenomenon of the Indonesia-Cambodia case where many Indonesian citizens were tempted by online job offers and ended up trapped in illegal gambling syndicates. The literature also notes that economic pressure in the home country makes many individuals vulnerable to the lure of pseudo-employment abroad (Putra, 2024).

The *modus operandi* of transnational crime syndicates continues to evolve according to the situation. Putra (2024) stated that the exploitation of non-procedural migrant workers as *online scammers* is the latest mode of human trafficking to emerge in Southeast Asia. Criminal networks combine cybercrime with human trafficking, creating a dual form of exploitation: victims are not only trafficked across borders, but are also forced to commit cyber-fraud (*scamming*) and online gambling operations for syndicate profits. The main driving factors are economic pressures and the influence of social media, which encourage people to take the risk of working abroad without a protection mechanism (Sugiyono M., 2024). This convergence between human trafficking and *cybercrime* has been identified as a serious *human security threat*, as it involves human rights violations and has the potential to disrupt the national security of the country of origin and destination (OHCHR, 2023).

In terms of legal and policy frameworks, there have been regional and bilateral efforts to respond to this kind of cross-border crime. ASEAN through the ASEAN Convention Against Trafficking in Persons (ACTIP) 2015 and the ASEAN Plan of Action 2016–2025 encourages member countries to strengthen law enforcement cooperation against trafficking in persons and cybercrime (Pratiwi & Sukandar, 2024). Indonesia and Cambodia are both parties to ACTIP, which emphasizes prevention, victim protection, law enforcement, and international cooperation (Valerisella & Sahetapy, 2025). Pratiwi and Sukandar's research (2024) shows that Indonesia's strategy in ASEAN is focused on diplomacy and cross-border coordination to

address the rampant trafficking in Cambodia, including strengthening intelligence information exchange and victim repatriation negotiations. Meanwhile, Indonesia-Cambodia bilateral cooperation has also begun to be improved, for example through a memorandum of understanding between the police and a joint task force to eradicate online gambling and fraud (Kompas, 2023).

These measures are based on the understanding that transnational crimes can only be dealt with effectively through synergy between countries, in line with the theory of transnationalism. Although previous studies have highlighted aspects of human trafficking, *cybercrime*, and regional cooperation, not many have specifically explored the modus operandi of transnational online gambling syndicates in the Indonesia-Cambodia case. This study will fill this gap by summarizing the latest empirical evidence (last 5 years) from academic journals, UN reports, and credible news. With a logical and analytical style of analysis, this literature review confirms that the phenomenon of cross-border online gambling syndicates is a multidimensional threat: ranging from socio-economic vulnerabilities, misuse of technology, legal loopholes between countries, to cross-jurisdictional law enforcement challenges (UNODC, 2025).

This study analyzes the modus operandi of organized transnational crime syndicates, focusing on their recruitment processes and operations within the online gambling industry in Southeast Asia, with a particular emphasis on cross-border dynamics between Indonesia and Cambodia. This study advances existing literature by specifically analyzing the modus operandi of transnational online gambling syndicates in the Indonesia-Cambodia corridor, a gap in prior research that broadly addressed human trafficking or cybercrime separately (Putra, 2024; UNODC, 2025). Unlike state-centric approaches, it employs transnationalism theory (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020) to dissect how non-state actors exploit digital recruitment, regulatory asymmetries, and cryptocurrency-based finance—a dynamic scarcely explored in earlier works (OHCHR, 2023; Sugiyono M., 2024). It also introduces fresh empirical evidence (2020–2025) on syndicates' adaptive strategies, such as relocating operations to Special Economic Zones (SEZs) and using layered recruitment routes (Indonesia, 2024; Putra, 2024), offering a comprehensive framework for understanding their cross-border resilience.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a descriptive qualitative approach with a case study on a cross-border online gambling crime syndicate between Indonesia and Cambodia. This approach was chosen because the problems studied are complex and involve the involvement of non-state actors, the dynamics of informal networks, and the socio-political context of the two countries that cannot be quantitatively explained. This research aims to uncover the patterns that shape the modus operandi of syndicates, as well as map the relationships between actors that operate beyond the boundaries of state jurisdiction.

The theory of transnationalism is used as the main analytical framework. In this perspective, crime is no longer seen as a domestic phenomenon that is completely controlled by the state, but rather as the result of the interaction of non-state actors that form a network across state borders (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020). This theory allows researchers to examine how syndicates take advantage of policy asynchronicities between countries, as well as avoid legal intervention through adaptation to institutional gaps. In the context of the Indonesia-Cambodia case, this theory is particularly relevant to explain why syndicates were able to survive and thrive despite diplomatic and law enforcement pressure.

The data in this study was collected from various secondary sources that can be verified and temporally relevant, namely between 2020 and 2025. These sources include five scientific journal articles Hammond et al., 2023(Pratiwi & Sukandar, 2024; Putra, 2024; Sugiyono M., 2024; Valerisella & Sahetapy, 2025), two official reports from international institutions

(OHCHR, 2023; UNODC, 2025), as well as three news from trusted national and international media (Kompas, Tempo, and South China Morning Post). The validity of the data is strengthened through triangulation between types of sources, for example by comparing quantitative data between UN reports and the media, and linking victim narratives with academic studies.

The analysis was carried out by mapping recruitment patterns, operational networks, forms of exploitation, and syndicate strategies in dealing with legal pressure. The data is processed through content analysis and thematic mapping methods to identify repetitive patterns and relationships between elements. A comparison between the legal and policy contexts in Indonesia and Cambodia was also carried out to understand how syndicates chose the location of operations, recruitment methods, and forms of protection for their networks. The results of the analysis are compiled into a complete narrative that explains the dynamics of the syndicate in a structured but flexible manner, according to the character of transnational crime.

This research is limited to the Indonesia-Cambodia operational path in the recent period. The focus of this case was chosen to explore the local context while still maintaining international relevance. The limitation of the research lies in access to the perpetrators and victims directly due to the illegal and closed nature of this network. Therefore, the reconstruction was carried out through the incorporation of findings from various sources, accompanied by caution in conveying inferences to maintain academic integrity.

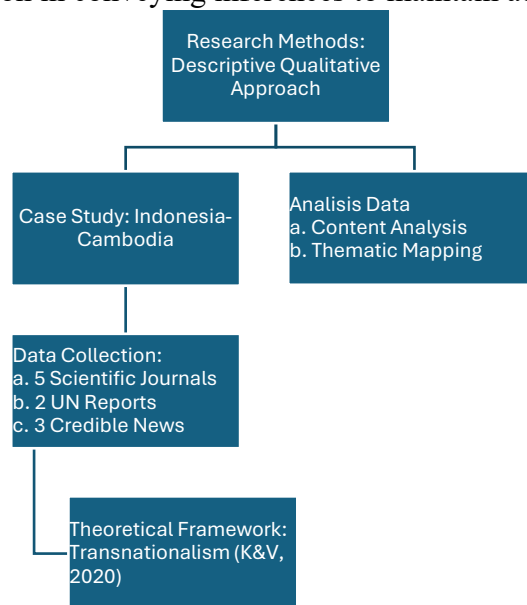


Diagram 1. Research Method - Analysis of Transnational Online Gambling Crime Syndicates.

Source: Researcher, 2025.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that online gambling syndicates operating across countries between Indonesia and Cambodia have a highly organized and structured recruitment pattern. The recruitment process is generally done through social media and instant messaging apps such as Facebook, Telegram, and WhatsApp, offering fictitious jobs that look professional, such as IT staff positions, content editors, or digital marketing. This offer comes with the lure of high salaries, free travel facilities, and accommodation abroad, thus attracting the attention of many aspiring young Indonesian workers. They are recruited non-procedurally and departed for Cambodia on tourist visas, without a valid work permit (Indonesia, 2024).

Upon arrival at the surgery site, the victims faced a reality that was the opposite of what was promised. They were immediately placed in a closed complex and made into operators of online gambling sites or online scam centers, under strict supervision with the forcible confiscation of identity documents. Long working hours, threats of violence, corporal punishment, and gun surveillance are part of the daily lives experienced by victims (OHCHR, 2023; SCMP, 2025). Some victims even reported not receiving any salaries at all, and they were unable to leave the site because they were locked up and intensively monitored by armed officers.

In terms of operational structure, syndicates form a complex and fluid cross-border network. Operational centers are often located in special economic zones (SEZs) or private apartment complexes that have their own security systems and tend to escape local government supervision. The capital owners and main controllers of syndicates are generally from third countries, such as China or other Asian countries, while labor recruitment is more focused on countries with high unemployment rates such as Indonesia. Logistics routes, payment systems, and fund escape are carried out with advanced digital technologies, including the use of cryptocurrencies and underground banking (UNODC, 2025).

The syndicate also showed a high adaptability to pressure from law enforcement officials. When repressive measures are carried out in one region, they quickly move operations to other areas that are more loosely supervised, including to countries around the Mekong region or other Southeast Asians. Some victims reported that they were moved from one country to another before finally arriving in Cambodia, indicating a layered and planned recruitment and transfer route (Putra, 2024). Meanwhile, to avoid detection, syndicates are now more selective in recruiting field agents, using local networks that are difficult to trace, and closing victims' communication access to the outside world.

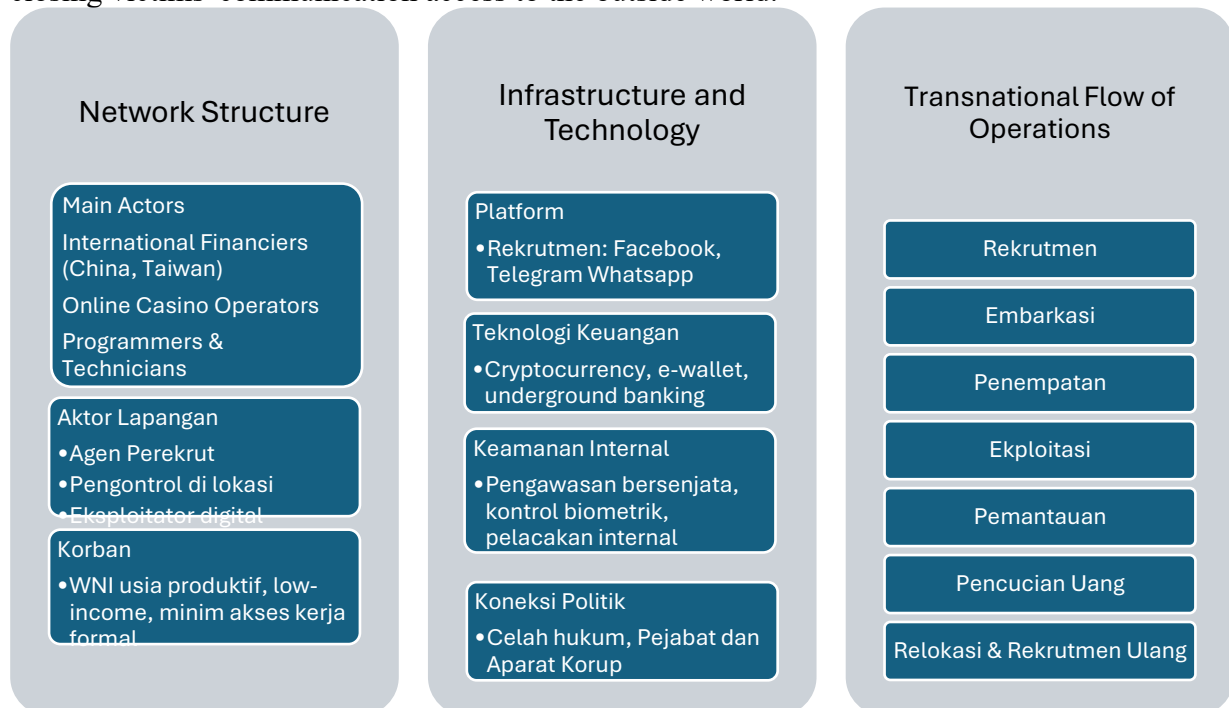


Diagram 2. Transnational Crime Operations Network Syndicate Online Gambling: Indonesia - Cambodia.

Source: Researcher, 2025.

Discussion

The results of this study reveal that transnational online gambling syndicates do not operate within the framework of conventional crimes that can be tackled domestically, but rather as part of a fluid and adaptive global network system. The patterns found, such as the use of social media for recruitment, digital-based exploitation, and the diversion of the location of operations, show that these crimes have a complex architecture and go beyond the boundaries of state jurisdiction. This is where the theory of transnationalism becomes relevant, as it places a focus on non-state actors and their interactions that are not controlled by state structures alone (Kauppi & Viotti, 2020). This approach allows for an analysis of the role of technology, digital finance, and the structural weaknesses between countries that syndicates exploit.

This study also shows that the response of countries, especially Indonesia and Cambodia, still tends to be reactive and fragmentary. Efforts to repatriate victims from Cambodia to Indonesia have indeed been carried out intensively since 2023, but have not been accompanied by upstream prevention systems, such as digital surveillance and non-procedural migrant protection (Pratiwi & Sukandar, 2024). On the other hand, Cambodia, despite having closed several gambling complexes, remains an area prone to reuse by perpetrators due to weak local law enforcement and high tolerance for economic gray practices (OHCHR, 2023). This policy asynchrony shows how fragile bilateral cooperation can be if it is not accompanied by a systematic, evidence-based cross-sectoral approach.

The syndicate's adaptation pattern to the pressure of the authorities is also an indication that this crime operation is not static. As pressure from the authorities increases in one location, syndicates quickly move their base of operations to another country or modify the form of crime to make it more difficult to trace. This shows that the logic used by the perpetrator is network logic, not hierarchy. In this context, the state's response that focuses only on formal legal aspects without an understanding of the syndicate's adaptation patterns will always lag behind. Therefore, a cross-border approach that integrates intelligence cooperation, digital surveillance, and strategies for the protection of vulnerable migrants is needed to reduce the rate of growth of this crime.



Diagram 3. Illustration of Transnational Crime: Online Gambling in Southeast Asia (Indonesia and Cambodia).
Source: Researcher, 2025.

CONCLUSION

This study reveals that transnational crime syndicates in the online gambling industry operate through adaptive, cross-border networks that evade state jurisdiction by leveraging digital recruitment, covert labor exploitation, and cryptocurrency-based financial systems, rendering purely national legal approaches ineffective. The theory of transnationalism helps explain these crimes as a product of interactions among non-state actors who exploit regulatory gaps, weak international coordination, and limited law enforcement detection, creating a resilient criminal ecosystem. The study emphasizes the need for a coordinated, cross-sectoral response involving intelligence agencies, financial regulators, migration authorities, NGOs, and digital platforms to dismantle these networks, while also calling for further research into the financial and digital aspects of transnational crime and the effectiveness of international cooperation in combating its evolving forms.

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