Social Media and Child Sex Trafficking

Introduction

Social media platforms have become an integral part of the lives of children and adolescents, providing opportunities for communication, self-expression, and engagement with peers.

At the same time, social media intersects with human trafficking in all the elements of the trafficking process.

As the entire world has flocked to the internet and social media, traffickers have quickly followed suit.
This guide presents how traffickers are taking advantage of new opportunities offered by technological advances, the growing number of social media users, and the increasing use of social media platforms to achieve their child trafficking goals.

**Human Trafficking Defined**

Human trafficking is a crime in which criminals, also known as traffickers, illegally recruit, obtain, or transport their victims for the purpose of sexual exploitation or forced labor.

This criminal activity is bringing a new level of horror to society across the globe as traffickers are developing new tricks and methods to lure and prey upon their victims.

The United States’ Trafficking Victims Protection Act of 2000 and its subsequent reauthorizations recognize and define two primary forms of human trafficking:

- **Sex Trafficking**: The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act in which a commercial sex act is induced by force, fraud, or coercion, or in which the person induced to perform such act has not attained 18 years of age. (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(A)).

- **Forced Labor**: The recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, or obtaining of a person for labor or services, using force, fraud, or coercion for the purpose of subjecting to involuntary servitude, peonage, debt bondage, or slavery. (22 U.S.C. § 7102(11)(B)).

Social media intersects with human trafficking in every element from the definitions above.
Traffickers use social media and technology for all stages of the trafficking, including recruiting and identifying future victims, gaining control over their victims, and advertising their victims.[2]

### How Social Media is Used in Recruitment

As technology advances and trends change, so do the websites and social media platforms used by traffickers.

Namely, platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, WhatsApp, and TikTok have led to a more globalized and connected society by making it easier for people across the world to spread ideas, communicate, and interact with ease, regardless of their physical distance.[3]

As a result, global social media usage has skyrocketed with an ever-growing number of users.

Traffickers use numerous methods to recruit victims of trafficking, often modifying their technique based upon the specific vulnerabilities or interests of the victim.

These large platforms allow traffickers to easily find a large volume of personal information about potential victims in the click of a button.

Information traffickers look for on social media platforms include victim’s friends, family, location, work, vacation patterns, revealing habits, and vulnerabilities.[4]

For example, many people often feel free to express personal troubles online on social media. However, traffickers can see this as a potential victim is in a state of hopelessness and therefore easier to manipulate, coerce, and control.

As a result, traffickers can easily profile and target their potential victims, including children before ever encountering them.
Based on all the information presented on social media, traffickers can then develop different targeted grooming strategies based on the potential victim’s social media presence.[5]

Today, social media has enabled access to a wide range of readily accessible personal information that was previously not as easily accessible.

New human trafficking cases filed in 2022 reveal there were 67 victims (19%) for whom at least one location of recruitment could be identified.[6]

Of the 347 sex trafficking victims surveyed:[7]

❖ 54 victims were recruited on the internet (16%)
❖ 4 victims were recruited at school (1%)
❖ 3 victims were recruited at a residence (1%)
❖ 2 victims were recruited on the street (1%)
❖ 2 victims were recruited at hotels (1%)
❖ 2 victims were recruited at a bus stop (1%)

There was insufficient information to determine the location of recruitment for 280 (81%) sex trafficking victims. Other locations included the victim’s residence, a carnival, a group home, and at work.[8]

Social Media as a Means of Coercion and Control

It is relatively rare for traffickers to use physical restraints as their primary control method, meaning victims are often not physically bound and held.[9]

Victims are instead controlled by nonphysical means rather than being controlled by cages, locked rooms, or barred cells.
Traffickers use psychological control over their victim and use coercion as a means of control and then exploit their victim.

Isolating victims from their support networks has long been a go-to method for traffickers seeking to assert or strengthen their control.\[^{10}\]

Victims have reported that traffickers use social media to:\[^{11}\]

- Restrict victims’ social media use in some way.
- Stalk or monitor victims’ social media.
- Exploit victims for commercial sex acts online.
- Advertise victims.
- Post or send harassing/threatening messages to victims.
- “Out” victims or spread lies or rumors.
- Hack victims’ social media accounts
- Impersonate victims.

Coercion and control do not necessarily end when the victim gets out of the situation. According to the National Hotline, traffickers use social media to stalk and abuse their victims long after they have left the trafficking situation.\[^{12}\]

In human trafficking cases, the relationship between victim and trafficker may involve trauma bonding, a phenomenon that is commonly referred to as “Stockholm Syndrome.”\[^{13}\] These two terms may be used interchangeably. The most common meaning of trauma bonding is when a trafficker uses rewards and punishments within cycles of abuse to foster a powerful emotional connection with the victim.

Traffickers may take on a role of protector or caretaker to maintain control of the victim, create confusion, and develop a connection or attachment with the victim.\[^{14}\] This, in turn, may cause the victim to feel a sense of loyalty to or love for the trafficker. This connection, or traumatic bond, becomes incredibly intense when fear of the trafficker is paired with gratitude for any kindness shown.\[^{15}\]
Trauma bonding in human trafficking is a psychological occurrence that often manifests in children and young women. Psychological coercion tends to increase the likelihood of trauma bonding.

Within human trafficking, trauma bonding may cause coerced co-offending, perceived inconsistency, delayed or inaccurate reporting, unwillingness to cooperate with law enforcement, or refusal to testify against their trafficker.\textsuperscript{[16]}

### Social Media Use in the Advertisement of Minors

Traffickers use a variety of methods to advertise and promote children for the purpose of sexual exploitation.

Due to the increasing popularity of social media platforms, traffickers have started to use social media to advertise children for commercial sex.

This rising trend of using social media for advertising purposes has raised concerns regarding the exploitation of minors.

Traffickers may abuse the traditional functions of social media platforms by posting explicit or exploitative images or videos of their child victims to attract potential buyers or clients.

Traffickers may also use coded language, suggestive messages, or even emojis to communicate with interested parties discreetly. These inconspicuous messages can be posted in the caption or the comment section of an image or video.

For advertisement purposes of child victims, traffickers can use social media hashtags or keywords. A hashtag is a word or phrase preceded by a hash sign (#). They are used on social media sites and platforms to identify digital content on a specific topic.
In these cases, traffickers may employ specific hashtags or keywords within their social media posts to signal their involvement in trafficking or to attract the attention of potential buyers.

These hashtags or keywords can act as covert signals within online communities engaged in illegal activities, allowing traffickers to easily connect with interested parties and like-minded individuals.

### Social Media Use in the Selling of Minors

The rise of social media platforms and their immense popularity has led to unprecedented opportunities for communication and interaction. Unfortunately, these same platforms have also inadvertently become venues for the sale of vulnerable people, particularly children.

Traffickers often use covert communication when engaged in the sale of trafficked children.

Covert communication includes coded language, hidden messages, or use of encrypted features while on social media platforms for the purpose of discreetly selling minors for commercial sex.

Human trafficking is a crime that is often hidden in plain sight, as traffickers use social media for the selling of minors.

The tactics of covert communications help traffickers to avoid detection and make it harder for law enforcement to uncover their activities.

Traffickers may share social media accounts or profiles with other individuals involved in their trafficking network for the purpose of selling children, thereby allowing them to coordinate activities while maintaining a level of anonymity or a common facade.
By sharing login credentials or managing joint accounts, they can communicate through posts, comments, or direct messages without arousing suspicion while facilitating the selling of children.

Traffickers take advantage of social media’s vast reach, accessibility, and diverse range of features to advertise children for sexual exploitation, arrange physical meetings, negotiate prices, and receive payments for children’s sexual services.

### Social Media Use to Connect with Like-Minded Individuals

Beyond personal interactions, social media have emerged as powerful tools for coordinating activities and facilitating communication among like-minded individuals, as they provide convenient means for traffickers to coordinate child trafficking activities and communicate with each other.

Through these online spaces, traffickers can connect with individual traffickers and members of criminal networks, intending to facilitate child trafficking activities.

Online child trafficking activities include spreading information about available victims and connecting with potential buyers.

Traffickers can use private messaging features, closed groups, or encrypted channels to discuss their activities, share information about potential victims or locations, and arrange transactions.

Social media platforms often provide private messaging features that allow users to have one-on-one conversations. As a result, traffickers can leverage these messaging functionalities to communicate with their associates, including recruiters, buyers, and other individuals involved in trafficking.

Traffickers also misuse closed groups and forums on social media platforms to cater to specific interests or communities. Within these private spaces, they can connect with
like-minded individuals involved in trafficking or seek out potential buyers or collaborations.

They may use coded language or encrypted messaging apps to further conceal their discussions, as encryption features provide a hidden space for illegal activities, including child trafficking.

Some coordination and communication goals that traffickers can achieve through social media include:

❖ Finding sex clients
❖ Expanding networks
❖ Coordinating sexual encounters
❖ Coordinating and receiving payments for minors’ sex acts

To accomplish these goals, traffickers can also use public posts on social media platforms as coded signals to communicate specific information. These posts may appear innocuous to others but carry hidden meanings understood only by those involved in trafficking. For example, a seemingly ordinary photo or status update may indicate a meeting location or a change in plans.

Social Media Use to Online Video Stream Child Sexual Exploitation and Abuse

In some cases, traffickers can misuse live video streaming services and platforms to broadcast sexual abuse or exploitation of child victims in real time.

These streams can be accessible to viewers who pay for access or engage in private chat sessions via social media with the traffickers, enabling direct exploitation and financial gain.
Social media platforms sometimes offer the ability to create closed groups or forums with restricted access, through which online video streaming of child sexual exploitation and abuse can take place.

Live streaming perpetuates the harm inflicted upon the child victims by potentially attracting more buyers or exploiters.

Traffickers may form or join such groups to communicate with a select group of individuals involved in trafficking.

Within these closed spaces, traffickers can discuss logistics, share information about potential victims, exchange contact details, negotiate deals, and watch online child sexual abuse at distance.

Social Media Use to Exercise Control over Children for Online Exploitation

Traffickers often misuse social media platforms to expand the scope and impact of their criminal operations by reaching a wide audience and targeting potential child victims.

When traffickers use social media as a tool to exercise control over children, they normalize exploitative activities and isolate the child from their support networks.

Children may unknowingly share personal information or details about their lives on social media platforms. By collecting data on a child’s interests, location, or relationships, traffickers can gain leverage, manipulate, and exert control over them.

Traffickers take advantage of minors’ particular situations by reaching out and offering help or assistance, ultimately drawing the victims into online trafficking situations.

Traffickers create fake profiles or use existing ones to connect with vulnerable children, particularly those who frequently share personal information or express vulnerabilities online.
Through direct messaging or grooming techniques, traffickers can lure child victims into exploitative situations that remain only online.

Traffickers use manipulation, flattery, or promises of a better life to gain the trust of their targeted minors. Then, traffickers build sexual relationships with minors for trafficking purposes.

In some cases, traffickers may offer gifts that align with the child’s interests or to fill a child’s need.

Traffickers may promise exciting or desirable items such as games, toys, gadgets, or clothing to entice the child and further strengthen the bond. These gifts may be digital, such as virtual items or in-game purchases, or physical gifts sent through online shopping platforms.

Traffickers may solicit explicit content, including material such as images or videos, which they then used to exert control over the child or demand further exploitative content or money from the child.

In some cases, traffickers engage in the grooming tactic of asking children to do “dares” that escalate into sexual activity online. For example, traffickers may begin to dare children to perform sexual behaviors, from removing clothes to increasingly sexual demands to engaging in sexual acts online.[17]

Traffickers may engage with very young children, even as young as 8 years old, subjecting them to online exploitation. In an example of these cases, a child wrote on a chat: “Please stop im only 9.”[18]

Traffickers engage in online sex trafficking of children, which can have severe psychological and emotional effects on the child, which in some cases, may lead the child to self-destructive behaviors.
In the United States, Congress created the Communications Decency Act (CDA) to regulate obscenity and indecency on the internet. The statute made it illegal to knowingly send or show minors obscene or indecent content online.

Section 230 of the CDA reads: “No provider or user of an interactive computer service[^19] shall be held liable on account of any action voluntarily taken in good faith to restrict access to or availability of material that the provider or user considers to be obscene, lewd, lascivious, filthy, excessively violent, harassing, or otherwise objectionable, whether or not such material is constitutionally protected.”[^20]

This means that social platforms are legally allowed to moderate their services by removing posts that are obscene or violate the services’ own standards, so long as they are acting in “good faith.”

In 2018, Section 230 of the CDA was amended by the Stop Enabling Sex Traffickers Act (SESTA) and the Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA).

This legal change introduced human trafficking as a human rights exception to Section 230, removing some of the legal protections for online platforms and service providers under this section.

As a result, these platforms can be accountable for material violating both federal and state sex trafficking laws.

Consequently, many online companies have implemented stricter content moderation and reporting mechanisms to prevent, *inter alia*, posting ads related to human trafficking and sexual exploitation on their platforms. This helps them avoid legal liability if their platforms are used to promote or facilitate forced prostitution and human trafficking, including the sale of children through online ads for sexual services.
Technology tools, such as image and video analysis, artificial intelligence, and blockchain technology, help to detect and remove illicit content and ensure that platforms have robust reporting mechanisms in place. By using those tools, social media platforms can become more proactive and efficient in removing explicit and exploitative content of children.

In compliance with this act, governments should continue to encourage the development of these technologies and technology tools which can help to prevent, detect, and combat online child sexual exploitation crimes and develop better intervention strategies.

**Recommendations for Social Media Platforms**

Social media platforms often have policies and mechanisms in place to combat trafficking activities, including collaborating with law enforcement agencies to identify and apprehend offenders involved in the sex trafficking of children.

However, due to the ever-evolving nature of social media, preventing online child sex trafficking remains an ongoing challenge.

It is crucial that social media platforms implement stricter policies and improved detection systems to identify and take action against accounts involved in online child sex trafficking.

Social media platforms should have stricter policies and the latest algorithms in place to detect human trafficking and sex trafficking of children. These measures could include setting clear community guidelines that explicitly prohibits the selling and exploitation of minors.

However, while platforms implement these stricter policies and the latest algorithms, they need to ensure that their actions do not adversely impact fundamental rights such as the right to privacy and the right to freedom of expression of users.
All social media platforms use algorithms, which are complex systems designed to
determine the type of content that users see on their feeds or timelines. These algorithms
collect data about users' behaviors, actions, and preferences based on the accounts they
follow, the content they engage with, their search history, and demographic details. The
algorithms provide insights into users' interests, preferences, and the type of content they
are likely to find relevant.

Social media platforms can develop proactive detection algorithms that can analyze
content and user behavior to identify patterns suggestive of child sexual exploitation.

By proactively identifying and removing such content and activities, platforms can disrupt
traffickers' operations, including recruitment, advertising, coordination of activities, and
control over victims, and protect potential victims.

Additionally, platforms should establish easily accessible reporting mechanisms that
enable users to report content or activities that is suspected of child trafficking or
exploitation.

Reported content and activities should be given priority for review and appropriate
action. Furthermore, anonymous reporting options would likely encourage users to report
suspicious activities without reluctance or fear.

Recommendations for Law and Policy

Governments should revise national legislation addressing child exploitation in
cyberspace, as it is essential to strengthen laws related to online child exploitation,
ensuring that they are up-to-date and effectively enforced.

Governments should work with technology companies and social media platforms to
provide clear guidance to strengthen the implementation of preventative measures for
the protection of children online.
This includes measures related to the prevention of these crimes, prosecution of offenders, protection of child victims, up to the age of 18 years old, of online harms, and promotion of international cooperation in combating these online crimes.

Online Safety and How to Protect Children

Minors are said to be easier to manipulate and exploit as they are often more vulnerable to force, fraud, and coercion. However, traffickers do not always discriminate based on age. No one is exempt from the possibility of becoming a victim of human trafficking. Nevertheless, some groups of people, such as women and children, may be at higher risk of becoming victims.

Traffickers are motivated by greed, driven by quota, and have no respect for human rights, as they prey upon the vulnerable and damage the physical or psychological well-being of their victims. There is not a consensus that social media is a net negative when it comes to human trafficking.

Social media can be used for combating human trafficking by disseminating large amounts of useful information to help fight forms of human trafficking, including child exploitation.

There are many ways the public and community at large can tackle the problem of human trafficking. One way is to understand how these cybercrimes happen against children for sexual purposes, as once the online methods and tactics used by traffickers are known, it is easier to detect signs of online exploitation.

Children often carry feelings of guilt and shame, although they are at no fault and are the victims in these situations. As a result, they will confine these feelings and not report the crime. Knowing and reporting signs of human trafficking is crucial in the fight. Therefore, it is important the public knows how to identify these warning signs and where/how to report potential trafficking.
The National Human Trafficking Hotline is available 24/7. Moreover, it is toll-free, completely confidential, and offered in 200+ languages. The National Human Trafficking Hotline can be reached via the following options:

- CALL 1-888-373-7888
- TEXT “BeFree” (233733)
- LIVE CHAT humantraffickinghotline.org

Report suspected incidents of online child exploitation to the National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's CyberTipline or 1-800-843-5678.

What Is Human Trafficking Front Doing?

Human Trafficking Front assists first responders, practitioners, parents, and families in recognizing the signs of online trafficking methods.

We advocate and influence legislation for a more robust response to preventing and combatting these online trafficking crimes: including the actions of connecting and grooming victims, advertising and promotion, facilitating their operations, and communicating with other individuals involved in child sex trafficking.

Human Trafficking Front designs and delivers public awareness campaigns to raise awareness, improve reporting of content and activities involving children, and enhance
cooperation between stakeholders by promoting a multi-faced approach to combat online child trafficking involving relevant stakeholders.

Human Trafficking Front encourages technology companies to work more actively to prevent their platforms from being used to facilitate child sex trafficking activities.

We build the capacity of law enforcement authorities to disrupt these trafficking activities and protect children online.

Human Trafficking Front disseminates evidence-based resources for parents, guardians, and educators to educate them on child sex trafficking and online child safety to protect children from online harm.

We encourage reporting any suspicious or uncomfortable online interactions involving minors in any form of abuse or exploitation to the platform and appropriate authorities, as this is critical to combating child trafficking on social media.

Additional Details

This best-practices prevention guide and publication is part of the Human Trafficking Front's program: *Putting an End to the Online Sexual Exploitation of Children: Preventing Victimization and Strengthening Child Protection Systems.*

Recommended Citation


References


[5] Ibid.


[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.


[12] Ibid.


[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.


[18] Ibid, p. 46.

[19] The term “interactive computer service” means any information service, system, or access software provider that provides or enables computer access by multiple users to a computer server, including specifically a service or system that provides access to the Internet and such systems operated or services offered by libraries or educational institutions.

Human Trafficking Front is a non-profit organization with 501(c)(3) status with the IRS, committed to eliminating all forms of slavery and human trafficking, especially of women and children. Human Trafficking Front works to end these forms of exploitation by equipping professionals with best practices, empowering communities to be less vulnerable to exploitation, and promoting more effective implementation of legal and policy frameworks that address prevention and protection. Human Trafficking Front is under the leadership of Dr. Beatriz Susana Uitts, who is the author of the book, *Sex Trafficking of Children Online: Modern Slavery in Cyberspace*. For further information see: [www.humantraffickingfront.org](http://www.humantraffickingfront.org).

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