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Social Media and Sex Trafficking Process: From Connection and Recruitment to Sales

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SOCIAL MEDIA & SEX TRAFFICKING PROCESS

from connection and recruitment, to sales

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Introduction & Study Methods

With the increase in technology use, it is important to understand the landscape of trafficking online. The Research Subcommittee of the Ohio Attorney General's Human Trafficking Commission was asked to conduct a study to gain a better understanding of how social media is used to connect, recruit, and sexually traffick youth. Therefore, researchers at University of Toledo in the Human Trafficking and Social Justice Institute designed and obtained university approval for this qualitative study.

Researchers interviewed knowledgeable professionals from the Ohio Anti Human Trafficking Coalition Network, then used snowball sampling, asking participants if they knew any other knowledgeable professionals who might be willing to participate. In total, there were 16 in-depth interviews conducted with participants that included knowledgeable members of law enforcement, judges, direct service providers, advocates, and researchers that had engaged victims that were trafficked online.

Screening questions were used initially with participants to determine eligibility, and knowledge about social media as a means to connect, recruit, and traffick youth. For those who were eligible, interviews were conducted over the phone and audio recorded using Google Voice or a traditional handheld recorder. Interviews lasted between 25 minutes to an hour. All participants were asked the same series of questions and asked to clarify or expand on some responses when necessary.

Completed interviews were transcribed verbatim, and transcriptions were analyzed line-by-line. From this analysis, codes were identified, and codes were collapsed into themes.

Findings

The Process

There are innumerable websites and applications designed to build community and connect users to new people. Any site that allows users to connect to people with numerous motives and intentions is an inherently risky site. However, most experts agree, the vulnerability of the user elevates risk. One professional reports, *"It feels less about the app and more about the person's vulnerabilities. I think when I get a friend request from a person I don't know, it doesn't even occur to me to start a relationship with someone that way, but I have a different background*

than many of these women. I think the risk is high because they are often looking for someone who can nurture them, care for them, and then so they are extremely vulnerable” – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018.

The Internet and social media allows traffickers to quickly connect with vulnerable youth. One professional explains, *“These guys are just master manipulators at making these, figuring out these girls vulnerabilities and insecurities and making them feel unloved...They use the app to watch for people that are sending out signals of what is going on in their life, and kids put a lot of stuff out there. There is a point where this girl goes from being out of sorts about her life at home...to fast forward six weeks and...she’s in Fort Wayne, Indiana doing commercial sex acts at the Red Roof Inn” – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018.*

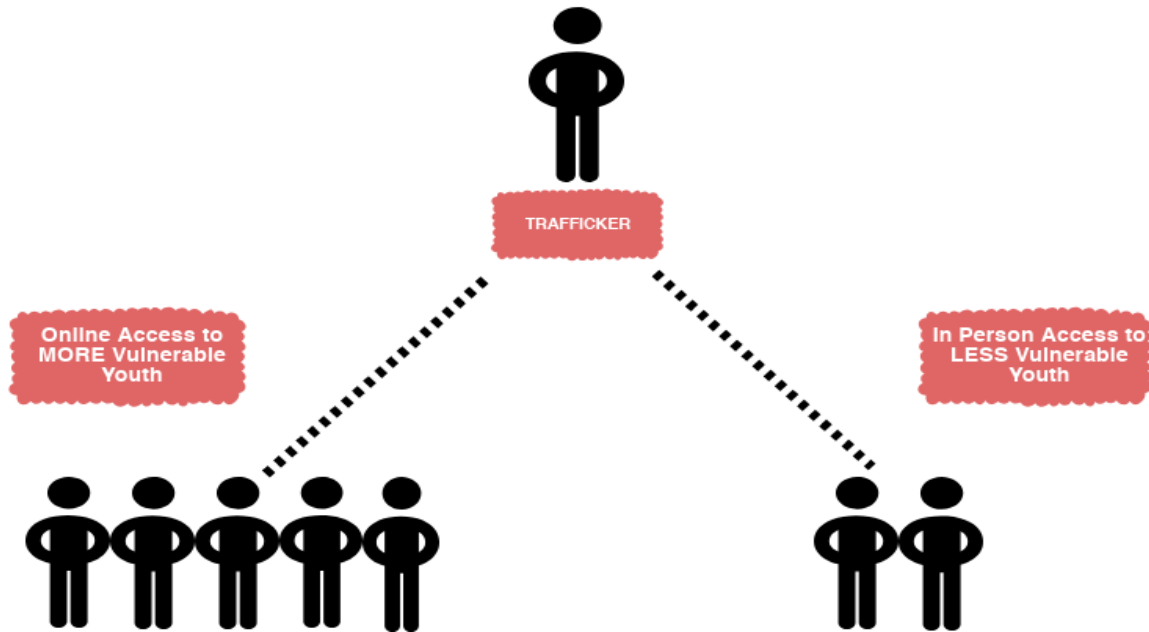
Traffickers can form intense relationships, which for youth can be all encompassing. As relationships are built, traffickers groom the youth to trust them. One professional describes the process *“These guys, they learn about the girls and pretend to understand them, and so these girls, who are feeling not understood and not loved and not beautiful. These guys are very good at sort of pretending that they are all of these things and they really understand them and, ‘I know how you feel, you are beautiful’, and just filling the hole that these girls are feeling. I think they educate themselves about the victim by the stuff the victim may have posted on Facebook over time. These guys are taking the time to study it. It gives them power over the girls to be able to manipulate them” – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018.*

Additionally, technology offers traffickers ease in advertising multiple victims at one time. One professional explains, *“Prior to online advertising there was not the level of access to, you know, for lack of a better word, to goods. Online advertising increases access to goods and in this case the goods are children being trafficked...It is not extinguishing the human element of it, but it is certainly increasing the impact of traffickers both in potential for sales and reaching buyers” – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018.*

This report serves to inform professionals, parents, and youth about the dangers of online predatory practices to connect, recruit, and sell youth for sex. This report outlines themes which include access and the ability to connect to more vulnerable youth online, the ease of assessing vulnerabilities online, online grooming to form quicker relationships, the use of self-erasing technology and/or developing a second persona to traffick youth, and moving youth from online to in-person. Quotes from professionals presented are used to explain each theme. At the end of this report, we provide a sample list of social media sites, describe how they are used, and provide what parents and youth can do to educate themselves and reduce online risk.

Access and Ability to Connect to More Vulnerable Youth Online

Social media allows for many more immediate connections and faster engagement with vulnerable youth compared to in-person connections.



“The guy was reaching out to a lot of girls all day long, one girl who is actually in a youth home, she had access to the internet, and he connects with her on a social media platform. He drives all the way up from Columbus to Toledo, picks her up at her foster home and drives her back down to Columbus, and then trafficks her here in Columbus. You know, 25, 30 years ago he would have never been able to connect with her, but, because of social media that connection was immediately made in over a few hours...He found out where she was and she told him, ‘yeah please come get me I want to get out of here’.” Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018

“You can potentially groom multiple victims at one time rather than if you were trying to meet with everybody; that would be more difficult to meet 5 or 6 potential victims at once, but online you can be grooming a lot of different people at all times of day.” - Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018

Online Grooming

Traffickers focus on meeting needs of vulnerable youth by understanding their vulnerabilities, then exploiting them by filling the void and using that to transition the relationship into one of control.

Emotion	Core Message from Youth that Exposes Vulnerability	What it might look like Online	Trafficker's Strategic Response	Trafficker Repellent
Need Understanding	I desire understanding. They don't understand me.	"Nobody gets me"; "You don't really know me"	I understand you.	Some people do understand me.
Emptiness/Love	I'm not feeling loved.	"I am so sick of being single"; "I wish I had someone around for me"	I love you.	I am loved.
Desire/Allure	I'm not feeling beautiful. I want you to like my body and my looks and think I'm desirable.	"OMG, I am so ugly"; "How do I look?"; "Check out my new pics." "What do you think?"	I think you're beautiful. I'll encourage you to show your body. Use your body	I am beautiful and I have beautiful elements to my body, mind, and spirit.
Disappointment	My life is not going well/not fulfilled.	"My life sucks." "Everyone in my life can go to hell." "Is this all there is to life?"	I'll make your life better.	My life is alright.
Connection	I don't have friends/family who care/connect to.	"She's not my true friend"; "If you're not going to support me, unfriend me"; "I don't need you anymore"	I'll be your best friend.	I have friends and family that care about me.
Freedom	I want to be treated like an adult. I want my independence. I want to take risks.	"My parents don't trust me"; "I'm being treated like a kid"	I'll encourage you to take risks. You are an adult.	I talk to my family and friends and negotiate my desire for freedom and independence.
Fear	I'm scared.	"I need to get out of here"; "Someone save me"	I'll protect you.	I talk to my family and friends about my fears and they support me.
Success	I want to be successful.	"I wish there was a way to make quick money"; "Need to step up my game and make real money"	I'll make you successful.	I am successful in my life right now.
Confidence	I'm not confident	"I don't know what to do"; "Is this right?"; "I don't know who I am"	Trust in me.	I'm pretty confident and know who I am.

"I mean, it's a common theme, they are looking for, and trying to prey on those that are vulnerable...[Youth are] saying, 'hey my life sucks,' and 'hey come see me.' You know if they get a response they will try to latch onto that and try to get them to work for them. I think especially young women with a little more confidence and smarts are not going to fall for that." – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018

Quicker Relationships

Social media helps to mask traditional cues that alert individuals to a potentially dangerous person and enables quicker relationships.



"You can develop this virtual relationship very easily without having to even leave your house or apartment. So if a trafficker can replicate that 20 to 30 times a day, their chances of finding a victim that will say, 'Hey meet me at the McDonald's', 'Hey do you want to go to a hotel party', it just makes it easier for them." – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018



"What puts the youth at risk is putting all kinds of personal information out there, including pictures of themselves and expressing 'I'm mad at mom today. I'm going to run away from home.' Traffickers look for any of these vulnerabilities, and then will reply 'I want to be your friend and we can talk about that and I'm sixteen just like you,' when they are really not and we know people that this has happened to." – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018

Self-Erasing Technology and/or Developing a Second Persona

Self-erasing technology or second persona profiles allow for communication with traffickers to be hidden and avoid suspicion from others.



"...the individual was able to migrate the conversation over to one of those [less familiar social media sites] by saying, 'you don't want your parents to find out what we're talking about,' and so they will use that fear of repercussions as a way to compel the youth, coerce the youth, and utilize those tools [applications]." – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018

"Kids will create what they call finstagram accounts that are fake Instagram accounts that their parents aren't aware of. So they have a completely squeaky clean Instagram account and then another alternative account, and a lot of exploitation can happen there." – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018

"...the mass IP self-erasing tech system..., they can organize and meet, and even if the phone is confiscated it can be very difficult to recover that information and make your case." – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018

Moving from Online to In Person

The transition from messaging to meeting a trafficker in person is becoming less prevalent. As technology is playing a larger role in trafficking, this allows some traffickers to be able to exploit youth without meeting face-to-face.



In 2004, 85% of victims that met their traffickers online eventually met them in person. According to a new study by THORN (2018), 58% of traffickers who first met their victim online eventually convinced them to meet in person. While 58% of victims still eventually meet their traffickers face-to-face, this is becoming less prevalent. Today, 42% of victims that initially met their trafficker online, never met their trafficker in person and were still trafficked. Study found at: http://2715111qnwey246mkc1vzqg0-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Thorn_Survivor_Insights_061118.pdf.

Connection, Recruitment, and Sales

“... grooming and recruiting and establishing that trust in that relationship.” – Ohio Anti-Trafficking Professional, 2018

	VIEW & COMMENT SITES	CONVERSATIONAL SITES-	WEBCAM SITES	ADVERTISING AND SALES SITES
Commonly Used Sites	<p>Facebook, Instagram (post photos to their profile, can comment on other photos, receive private messages, and have a second account that parents don't know about called “finstagram” or fake instagrams),</p> <p>Snapchat (picture messaging and posting publicly, disappears after being opened, and private message/picture/video sharing function)</p>	<p>Tinder (dating app to chat with people you match with, private message to communicate, meet & date),</p> <p>Blendr (dating app with private chat, GPS location to loosely locate others)</p> <p>Whatsapp (encrypted messaging app where service providers do not keep copies of messages on their servers and only the two people communicating can access those messages),</p> <p>KIK (messaging app that is not connected to a phone number, messages are not saved on a server for access outside of the chat)</p>	<p>Chatroulette (webcam with strangers individually, users can rotate through multiple strangers and web cam with a private chat box under the webcam screen),</p> <p>Omegele (webcam with strangers individually, users can rotate through multiple strangers and web cam with a private chat box under the webcam screen)</p>	<p>Cityxguide (classifieds, escort site with advertisement),</p> <p>Skipthegames (escort site with individuals advertising services),</p> <p>Bedpage (new website after backpage shut down, classifieds, escort site with individual advertisement of services),</p> <p>Seekingarrangement.com (dating, sugar daddy site, profile site similar to dating profiles with messaging)</p> <p>Sugar-babies.com (sugar babies advertising site with profiles for johns/sugar daddies to browse & message)</p>
Less Common Sites	<p>YikYak (anonymous posting with comment section, GPS location allowing others to identify where users are within a certain radius),</p> <p>Whisper (anonymous posting with ability to comment and private message users anonymously)</p>	<p>Yellow (dating/friends app for youth with swipe function, “tinder for kids”),</p> <p>#1 Chat Avenue (chat room for kids with strangers in one large group, can message in a large group, or privately message)</p>	<p>Monkey (webcam with strangers for limited amount of seconds and youth need to add users as friends for unlimited time, advertised to youth specifically)</p>	<p>Less common sites cannot be identified as the landscape is rapidly changing after the FOSTA/SESTA legislation, “<i>the whole scene went dark and now it's all scattered all over....it's gonna take a while before another site comes back, but another site will come back</i>” – Ohio Police Officer</p>
Process	<p>Potential traffickers may like, comment, ask to be friends, and gather information that they can then use to recruit and groom youth with.</p>	<p>Chatting with young person, possibly after gathering information on a view & comment site. Grooming can occur on these messaging apps & sites, convincing someone to send a risky picture and then using it to extort them.</p>	<p>Fill vulnerabilities, build trust, and get them to share more of their body in pictures. Move them from monitored page to less monitored page.</p>	<p>Move them from sharing to selling or selling pictures online of themselves.</p>

Barriers to Traffickers

Educated Parents

Parents who are educated can wage a worthy defense against potential recruitment and exploitation of their youth on online. Parents may read about various populations and less popular sites to learn more about how to protect their child. Parents that work to build healthy, open, and communicative relationships are more likely to have youth that share information about where they go and who they talk to online.

Where to Learn More:

<http://internetsafety101.org/internetpredators>

<https://www.netsmartz.org/Home>

<http://www.connectsafely.org/guides-3/>

<http://www.connectsafely.org/educatorguides/>

<http://www.connectsafely.org/a-parents-guide-to-cybersecurity/>

http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/risktaking_teenagers.html

Parents who Monitor/Block Questionable Activity

The variations within developmental age for youth requires different strategies for different ages. The younger the youth, the more parents should monitor where youth may go on the internet and who is talking to them. The older the youth, the more parents will need to educate and partner with the youth to practice safety.

Where to Learn More:

https://www.cdc.gov/healthyyouth/protective/pdf/parental_monitoring_factsheet.pdf

<http://www.cyberpatrol.com/>

<http://www.cyberSitter.com/>

<http://www.familyconnect.com/>

<http://www.netnanny.com/>

<https://www.ypad4change.org/predators-use-social-media-to-target-children-infographic/>

FOSTA-SESTA Bill

The intent of the law is to protect youth, however the law does not replace the diligence that parents need and the cautiousness that youth need to practice while online. Even though Backpage has been shut down, other sites are being created and gaining traffic for example, Bedpage is a spin-off of Backpage.

Where to Learn More:

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1693/summary/01>

Educated Youth that Practice Safety

Parents and laws cannot do it alone. Youth need support and partnership of educated youth who see the potential dangers, and want to practice being safe online. This is the foundation that will allow for successful barriers to trafficker attempts.

Where to learn more:

<https://www.safekids.com/quiz/>

<http://www.connectsafely.org/contracts/>