

A Digital Age: How Social Media Enables Sex Trafficking

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Sex trafficking, a 150 billion dollar industry, trafficks more than 25 million people globally (Anthony, 2018). There are over 8,592 potential victims recruited every year, and at least 87% of these potential victims will be female. Majority of these young women will be between the ages of 11-23 (Anthony, 2018). More than half of these victims will be recruited through social media. (Anthony, 2018). Social media is at the grasp of virtually anyone, anywhere and provides instantaneous connections all around the world. With social media use ever increasing, teenage girls are not likely to fall short of the trend and neither are traffickers. The rise of the digital age has moved virtually everything online, enabling sex trafficking to be as easy as ordering a package. This paper will explore the ways in which social media has enabled the sex trafficking and recruitment process to become much more dangerous and prevalent online. For traffickers, it is easy to recruit girls as social media provides an instantaneous connection to a vulnerable population. The grooming and recruitment process requires little effort as well, and sales are made almost instantaneously.

Social media is not exclusive to one demographic and has been known to increase vulnerability in users, making victims easier to lure. Social media creates a connection for traffickers to attract a vulnerable population. Many users take to social media as a means to escape and discuss mental health problems that are affecting their everyday lives. Instead of helping, social media can actually affect the user's mental health negatively. Social media usage has been known to have a significant impact on women's mental health, including "depression (Błachnio, Przepiórka & Pantic, 2015; Steers, Wickham, & Acitelli, 2014), poor self-esteem (Błachnio, Przepiórka & Rudnicka, 2015), high anxiety (Labrague, 2014), high body dissatisfaction (Fardouly, Hershenson, Bhatia, & Halliwell, 2014), and low self-perceived

physical attractiveness (Haferkamp & Krämer, 2011)” (Sherlock & Wagstaff, 2018, p. 4). Social media has also been used as a coping mechanism to deal with these feelings of loneliness and depression, as “it starves off perceived loneliness” (Pittman & Reich, 2016). Some women then take to social media to express their feelings of depression by using popular hashtags to expand to a broader audience and receive more consulting. Through hashtags, these posts are shared globally, as they are being filtered under certain tags, making the post more public (Kunz et al., 2018). Traffickers then prey on these girls since they have already figured out the girls’ vulnerabilities without even starting the grooming process. Social media use enables traffickers to specifically target the vulnerable, which in the past required a lot more effort.

The grooming and recruitment process is then made easy. Targeting girls to traffic off of social media is made much faster and more reliable than traditional, in person methods. Case data shows that 845 victims who were recruited through social media platforms, 250 of these victims through Facebook, 120 through a dating site, 78 through Instagram, and 489 were recruited through chat rooms or unidentified websites (Anthony, 2018). Not only are girls easily accessible for recruitment online, the grooming process is made simpler. Vulnerable girls create an easy target for traffickers, since traffickers know the girls’ insecurities. Contrary to the media’s aggressive portrayal, traffickers typically go for the “boyfriending” method during recruitment. Kunz and colleagues, (2018) provided a study in which victims messages were displayed and traffickers would use those messages to create a response where the victim felt understood. For example, girls would post about their appearance saying “OMG, I am so ugly” and the traffickers’ crafted response would be “I think you’re beautiful. I’ll encourage you to show your body. Use your body (Kunz et al., 2018).” This is likely to then give the victim a false

sense of security to let her guard down around this person, even though she has never interacted with the trafficker on a personal basis, because she feels like they understand her. Social media tends to give victims a false sense of security because traffickers are able to get to know the most vulnerable parts of a girl without even interacting with her face to face.

Not only does social media allow the recruitment process to be made easy, it also allows for consumers to have easy access to the young women exploited. The globalization of social media has also caused a massive upsurge of trafficking sales. Social media allows for instant access to a variety of girls at the tip of consumer's fingertips. Consumers (also known as Johns) can access any type of girl they are seeking from the security of their own home, resulting in an increased market. This increase in accessibility and large market has created a massive consumer base (Anthony, 2018). Johns do not have to spend hours searching on the dark web for girls either, rather girls are being advertised on Craigslist and formerly Backpage. Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Kik, Plenty of Fish, OKCupid, and Tinder were also mentioned as commonly used sites (Anthony, 2018). Ordering a girl for the night is as easy as ordering any other product online (Kunz et al., 2018). Based off of the Johns' search history, new girls will pop up as advertisements creating no need to search for a girl, search engines will hand tailor to your previous searches (Anthony, 2018). Social media sites like these then normalize sex work, making it more societally acceptable, further enabling more Johns' to exploit these women.

Social media has significantly enabled the sex trafficking market, and will continually grow over time. Social media allows anyone in the world to be able to reach the most vulnerable girls, making it easy to prey on their vulnerability. It's an endless supply. Social media then makes it easy for traffickers to target a girl because they can have a connection with her anytime,

anywhere with a simple comment or message. Johns also experience an instantaneous connection to the girl, only making it easier. Social media will never go away, it is ever increasing as time goes on. As Anthony (2018) explained, “Only by understanding how these two sectors interact can we get the best out of the one and begin to shut down the other (p.17).” Through education and encouraging more app developers to monitor popular tags is the only way we have a shot of combating this horrific crime.

### References

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