

# THE TRAPS OF ONLINE COMMUNICATION VS HUMAN TRAFFICKING

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**Abstract:** *One of the most serious social issues of our time is represented by human trafficking, and the consequences of this phenomenon are devastating. Along with the development of society, significant changes have occurred at the level of interaction between peers, communication in the online environment being preferred over face-to-face communication. The time spent in the online environment and communication with unknown people can create a favourable context for human traffickers, who mainly target people in vulnerable situations such as children and young people from disorganized families, single mothers, people with a precarious financial situation looking for a job etc. The investigative approach consisted in conducting quantitative research with the questionnaire as a research tool, applied online to a number of 141 people. The purpose of the research was to determine the population's perception of the risks of online communication with unknown persons.*

**Keywords:** human trafficking, communication, vulnerability, online environment.

## 1. Introduction

Currently, one of the main methods of retrieving victims of human trafficking is represented by the Internet. Over 75% of children connect daily to social networks and communicate with unknown people. <https://www.salvaticopiii.ro/combaterea-traficului-de-copii>

The use of online platforms allows the trafficker to contact his victims from anywhere, without having a fixed location, a fact that complicates criminal prosecution and stopping the phenomenon. Traffickers can even operate more easily across borders, having access to a larger number of potential victims from around the world (Schrock 2022).

The criminal contacts his potential victims on social networks such as Facebook, and one of the techniques used to gain trust is to express admiration for the victim. Whether with the promise of fame or a job, the criminal lures the victim away from his home. Afterwards, methods are used to restrict communication with the people close to them, a context in which they resort to violence and threats targeting both the victim and her family (Dixon 2013).

The use of mobile phones with prepaid cards makes it difficult to access the user as he cannot be identified through a possible service contract. However, most advertisements used to promote victims include a phone number, including customer reviews involving the use of a phone number (Ibanez and Suthers 2014). Thus, before the advent of the Internet, traffickers were more visible, as victims were advertised on the street. Currently, there are many websites that help traffickers to remain anonymous (Alvari, Shakarian and Snyder 2016).

In the opinion of the author Alexandru (2010:554), human trafficking represents a form of modern slavery. According to the literature, human trafficking involves all acts or actions, from recruitment to transfer to another country, which are carried out through the use of threats, abuse, physical force, deception or any other form of coercion aimed at exploiting the victims (Fehér, 2009: 211).

From a legislative perspective, human trafficking is defined as follows: Human trafficking means "recruiting, transporting, transferring, harbouring or receiving people, through threats of or recourse to force or other forms of coercion, through kidnapping, fraud, deception, abuse of authority or a situation of vulnerability, or by offering or accepting payments or advantages to obtain the consent of a person in authority over another, for the purpose of exploitation. Recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring or receiving a child for the purpose of exploitation will be considered human "trafficking", even if it does not involve any of the means exemplified above (<https://anitp.mai.gov.ro/legislatie/>).

Trafficker – the person who commits the crime of human trafficking; this person may be sentenced depending on the circumstances and consequences of the act with imprisonment from 5 to 25 years and the prohibition of certain rights (according to the Criminal Code of Romania).

## 2. Types of traffic

Over time, several forms through which people can be trafficked have been identified. The common denominator in most cases is the traffickers' speculation of the vulnerable state of the victims.

- **Trafficking for sexual exploitation** – when a child, adolescent or woman is forced to have sexual relations for money, or to appear in certain materials with adult content ; when a woman marries a man and is subjected to bad treatment, such as slavery, physical verbal, sexual violence. Usually these marriages are concluded with the help of agencies that deal with this type of actions, but there are also situations where women agree to marry a man just to obtain citizenship.
- **Organ trafficking** – it involves depriving a person of their freedom and removing their organs (liver, kidneys, ovaries) against their will.
- **Work in slavery conditions:** it is characterized by abominable working conditions, those who work are not remunerated or receive modest amounts. <http://prorefugiu.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Manual.pdf>

## 3. Causes of human trafficking

The phenomenon of human trafficking has many causes such as poverty, gender discrimination or ethnic discrimination, greed, government policies regarding migration in the countries of origin and/or destination. The research carried out in the field of human trafficking demonstrates the existence of two categories of factors:

**Macro-social factors:** decreasing incomes, unemployment, lack of jobs; the existence of a socio-cultural environment tolerant when it comes to acts of violence; the existence of a small number of relevant educational programs (sexual education, couple education), but also the lack of educational opportunities for certain categories of the population; the development of international migration for work; low involvement of the political and legal system; natural disasters that lead to poverty of large segments of the population; family abandonment.

**Micro-social factors:** poverty and reduced possibilities to find a job; low level of education of both the trafficked person and his or her family; the existence of toxic family relationships; deviant behaviours (aggression, consumption of alcohol and other substances); the desire to be surprised and experience new things, the influence of the environment; missed emotional relationships, disappointments; low self-esteem; mental lability; low trust in institutions and specialized persons who could provide support to overcome crisis situations <https://lege5.ro/App/cauze-si-factori-de-risc-ai-traficului-de-persoane-hotarare-1654-2006> .

#### 4. Stages of human trafficking

Taking into account the documents of the United Nations Organization, human trafficking involves the following stages: recruiting, transferring and harboring a person by using illegal methods (abuse of power, deception, threat, etc.), all of which have the purpose of exploiting the person for sex, forced labour or services such as begging or organ harvesting.

1. **Recruitment** – most of the time the recruiters are people whom the victims met online, with whom they socialize frequently and who promise them a better life abroad.
2. **Transport** - human trafficking takes place on certain routes, from the country of origin to the country of destination. Most of the time the destination is completely different from the one known to the victim, the border crossing is done with the help of recruiters or guides and can be: legal under the pretext of a trip (in the case of girls who have a passport); illegal, in the case of minors or people without a passport, in which case the guides promise to take them across the border safely in exchange for a sum of money or even without payment.
3. **The sale of the person** – it takes place when they arrive at destination, the victims become someone's "property" against their will, and the price is set in most cases taking into account the victim's age and physical appearance.
4. **Seizure and exploitation** - as a rule, the victims only realize that they have been sold when they are seized and exploited, they are not allowed to communicate with anyone, their documents are withheld, and their phones are isolated in closed spaces; they are physically, mentally and verbally assaulted, in some cases this situation even leads to murder.
5. **Resale** - at this stage the victims of human trafficking enter a circuit of false debts to the trafficker, who tells the victims that they must recover their money from their work and thus they are sold to another "owner"
6. **Escape** – this is premeditated and prepared long in advance by the victim, the escape takes place with the support of the police when they conduct a raid or with the help of customers who want to help them.
7. **Repatriation** – it takes place with the help of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Romanian embassies and/or consulates that deal with repatriation formalities.

[https://childhub.org/sites/default/files/library/aas\\_ghidde\\_informare\\_tfu\\_1.pdf](https://childhub.org/sites/default/files/library/aas_ghidde_informare_tfu_1.pdf).

#### 5. The methodological dimension of the applied research

The approach is of a quantitative type, the method used being the sociological survey based on a questionnaire. The questionnaire was applied online, the research group consisting of 138 respondents, of which 113 people from the urban environment and 28 people from the rural environment. The purpose of the quantitative research was to determine the population's perception of the risks of online communication with unknown persons.

The methodological dimension on the causes and effects of online communication with unknown persons involves a combination of normative and interpretive analysis of the collected data. The normative part starts from the description of the phenomenon of online communication through the questionnaire, and in the second part, the interpretive part, the phenomenon of human trafficking, as it is perceived in social reality, is approached from a systemic perspective. By using these two types of analysis, different data are highlighted, the normative analysis that emphasizes what is explainable, verifiable in reality, quantifiable, objective, external, and the other part that focuses on what is interpretive, subjective, unique, internal (Cohen, Manion, 1981, apud Damaziere, 1996). These analyses contribute to the understanding and explanation of social reality from two different perspectives.

By analysing the studies from the literature in the field of this research, it was found that many causes of human trafficking are due to toxic behavioural patterns, vices, fear, lack of confidence in one's own strength, and the failure to report them is due to a lack of trust in the competent state bodies. The applied research set out to sketch a clear picture of the population's perception regarding online communication with unknown persons, for highlighting the information gaps which lead to the propagation of the negative effects of this phenomenon.

The survey is one of the most complex methods of sociological investigation, based on the collection of data from a sample drawn from a population. The data collection is done by applying questionnaires to the subjects (Curelaru, 2003: 45).

Chelcea emphasizes that "the research questionnaire represents a technique and correspondingly an investigative tool consisting of a set of written questions and possibly graphic images, ordered logically and psychologically, which by administration by the investigation operators or by self-administration, triggers from the part of the investigated persons answers to be recorded in writing" (Chelcea, 1998: 180).

## **6. Research design. Quantitative research objectives**

Objective 1: Identifying the degree of population's awareness regarding the risks that may arise when communicating with unknown persons on the Internet;

Objective 2: Highlighting the proportion in which respondents were approached by unknown persons on social networks;

Objective 3: The population's perception of the sincerity of online conversations with strangers.

## **7. Data analysis and interpretation**

Following the objectives of the research approach, the research questions were established. The sample size was 141 people, of which 113 came from the urban environment and 28 from the rural environment. The group of subjects is uniform, there is no predominance of a certain gender that could affect the research results. Analysing the data obtained, the established hypotheses were verified and thus validated.

We can see that a large number of men and women surveyed (78%) believe that social networks are dangerous, 6.4% are of the opinion that they do not present any kind of danger; the rest of 15.6% are not aware of the danger.

Of the respondents, 89.4% stated that they are familiar with the term human trafficking, and 10.6% declared that they do not know the term.

It was found that 85.1% of the surveyed subjects have been approached by unknown people on social networks, while 14.9% claim that they have not experienced such moments.

From the analysis, we see that 4.3% of the people surveyed have total trust in the people they communicate with online, 67.4% have partial trust, and 28.4% have no trust at all in the people they interact with online.

Following the frequency analysis carried out, we can conclude that although most respondents (79.4%) agree that human trafficking involves the recruitment, transfer and harboring of a person through the use of abuse of power, deception or threat, aiming to exploit the person for purposes of sex, forced labour or services such as begging or organ harvesting; a relevant percentage (20.6%) do not adhere to this statement. We can also state that this aspect is not influenced by the level of education of the respondents.

The sociological investigation led to the drawing of the following conclusions: a significant percentage of the people surveyed, namely 89.4%, declare they know the term "human trafficking", while 10.6% of the respondents do not recognize the existence of this phenomenon. Another highlighted aspect is that the respondents are aware of the fact that social networks, namely online communication can be dangerous, 78% of them affirming this;

15.6% believe that social networks do not present any risk; 6.4 agree that one could become a victim of human trafficking at any time by communicating with strangers on the Internet.

Analysing the responses obtained from the subjects, we remarked that a significant number of them, 85.1%, were at some point approached by unknown persons on social networks, an aspect that reinforces the idea that the online environment is not at all safe, being at risk to be contacted at any time by human traffickers, who under various pretexts come into contact with people in vulnerable situations. One of the questionnaire items concerned the degree to which they trust unknown people, and the obtained percentages demonstrate that: 4.3% of the people surveyed have total trust in the people they communicate with online; 67.4% partially trust those people; the remaining 28.4% are totally reluctant to communicate with strangers online.

We conclude that online communication is extremely widespread, with most respondents preferring online communication over face-to-face communication.

## **8. General conclusions of the paper**

The globalization of society and the rapid and continuous development of online means of communication have rather reduced face-to-face interaction, social networks registering millions of users daily. The possibility of connecting and communicating with people from all the corners of the world can represent a real advantage, but it also involves a lot of risks, communication in front of a screen often leads to the creation of false identities and the delivery of promises that have nothing to do with reality.

Human trafficking currently represents one of the most serious problems of contemporary society, the seriousness of this phenomenon being also influenced by the trust that some people grant to unknown persons, sharing aspects of their personal life, such as the composition of the family, the difficulties faced, personal problems and expectations, a context in which human traffickers speculate on their vulnerability and create a false story through which they manage to convince certain persons, such as single mothers, unemployed people, children and adolescents in vulnerable situations, to follow them by promising them a new life and a much better living.

The applied research demonstrated the fact that the population is aware of the human trafficking phenomenon, that they realize the danger posed by online communication with unknown people on various social networks, a significant percentage affirming that they were approached by unknown people in the online environment.

One of the measures that should be undertaken by the authorities, together with other social stakeholders, social workers, psychologists, teachers, is represented by the constant running of information campaigns regarding the extent of human trafficking among the vulnerable population: children, adolescents, people facing crisis situations.

Another aspect that can contribute to the prevention of human trafficking is the permanent monitoring by parents of the online activity of children, so that they can be informed about the people with whom children communicate and the activities they carry out online.

We believe that the teaching staff should present to the pupils and students during the educational classes with the form teachers' statistics regarding the extent of the phenomenon of human trafficking in the world and talk to them about things that are important to know, so that they do not risk becoming victims of this phenomenon.

All in all, human trafficking is a current phenomenon, a major problem of contemporary society, which can affect many segments of the population.

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