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## Dark side of the Internet: studying online human trafficking

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## Dark side of the Internet: studying online human trafficking

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We are living in a digital, technology-saturated world, in which online social networks and the internet allow us to engage in various activities that are not available offline. Such activities include connecting with friends and family virtually, making new friends, sharing pictures, and exchanging ideas. However, the internet and online social networks have emerged as major source that predators use to identify victims of online trafficking.

The June 2021 *Federal Human Trafficking Report* states that 83% of active sex trafficking cases involved online solicitation, which is overwhelmingly the most common tactic traffickers use to solicit sex buyers. 65% of underage victims recruited online in 2020 active criminal sex trafficking cases were recruited through Facebook, 14% were recruited through Instagram, and 8% were recruited through Snapchat (Federal Trafficking Report 2021). Hence, there is an immediate need to address the issue of online trafficking. The government and other institutions are struggling to manage this rising problem, let alone define a strategic direction or an over-encompassing strategy.

To address the paucity of academic and policy-related research, in this paper, we use Keeney's (1992) Value-Focused Thinking (VFT) approach to define strategic objectives for preventing online sex trafficking. While such objectives can be developed in a top-down manner by lawmakers, there is growing evidence about the efficacy of policies that are based on the individual values of those who are directly affected. We interviewed over 100 individuals and systematically followed Keeney's VFT approach to identify 279 values and 117 objectives. These objectives were then clustered into 23 major objectives. In a final synthesis, we present 5 fundamental and 18 means objectives. The means and fundamental objectives come together to define a strategic framework for online sex trafficking policy.

Our research makes two broad contributions. First, we present a conceptual framework of means and fundamental objectives for preventing online sex trafficking. This framework forms the basis for a theoretical understanding of online human trafficking. Second, we provide a practical basis for developing policies that governments and organizations can use to prevent online human trafficking.

### References

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