

**SYNTHETIC PROXIMITY: AI FACILITATED TRAFFICKING AND THE COLLAPSE  
OF PROTECTIVE DISTANCE**

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## **Abstract**

International trafficking law presumes human proximity: recruiters require shared language, local presence, or established relationships to deceive victims. This foundational assumption no longer holds. Artificial intelligence systems now enable traffickers to fabricate linguistic fluency, institutional legitimacy, and sustained engagement across populations they have no genuine connection to—capabilities this article terms "synthetic proximity." Through analysis of large language model capabilities, documented trafficking cases, and malicious AI deployment by criminal and state actors, the article demonstrates how AI eliminates protective distances that historically constrained exploitative access. This transformation exposes critical deficiencies in legal frameworks: agency attribution becomes ambiguous when deception is algorithmically generated; jurisdictional principles fail when recruitment occurs through synthetic proximity; evidentiary authentication exceeds most prosecutors' technical capacity. The article argues that an effective response requires reconceptualizing trafficking law around AI-mediated exploitation, establishing platform accountability obligations, and coordinating anti-trafficking organizations with AI safety communities before synthetic proximity capabilities become ubiquitous.

## **I. Introduction**

Throughout history, trafficking in persons has fundamentally depended on human connections for victim recruitment. Whether through family ties, intimate relationships, local brokers, or trusted intermediaries, recruitment relied on traffickers, their intermediaries, and their ability to communicate in relevant languages, navigate social and cultural norms, establish credibility, and build trust over time. Even in the digital era, recruitment has remained in human hands. This imposes friction, costs, and risks, shaping who can be reached, how persuasion unfolds, and operational scale (UNODC, 2018a; UNODC, 2020).

However, with the widespread availability of cheap, powerful artificial intelligence (AI), this is no longer the case. AI-enabled systems allow traffickers to bypass many of the practical and social constraints that historically limited the recruitment, deception, and manipulation of

victims. AI, and in particular Large language models, enable communication across linguistic and cultural boundaries, simulation of institutional legitimacy, and sustained persuasive engagement without physical presence or pre-existing social ties. These capabilities allow manipulation, deception, and coercion to be exercised remotely, persistently, and at scale (OSCE and RSO, 2024; Levesque, 2025). This is already evident in trafficking for forced criminality in scam centres where AI-generated advertisements and AI-created synthetic profiles are utilized to deceive victims (INTERPOL, 2025; United States Department of State, 2025; CSIS, 2024).

Researchers have begun documenting malicious AI use by criminal actors, creating threat taxonomies that describe emerging generative AI deployment in fraud, impersonation, and social engineering within trafficking contexts (Europol, UNICRI and Trend Micro, 2020; EL PACCTO, 2025; Levesque, 2025). However, this work is still nascent, and the field lacks a practical conceptual framework for understanding AI's impact beyond cataloguing tools or incidents.

This article addresses that gap by proposing the concept of “synthetic proximity”: the ability for bad actors to create functional closeness, including linguistic, cultural, relational, and institutional proximity to victims (among others). It describes the cumulative effect of AI capabilities operating together to eliminate distances that historically constrained exploitative access. Synthetic proximity systematically erodes frictions that once limited reach, persuasion methods, and control mechanisms.

Understanding AI-enabled trafficking through synthetic proximity has direct implications for law, policy, and prevention. Trafficking frameworks were developed assuming proximity, trust, and legitimacy emerged through human interaction, local embedding, or established relationships. As AI increasingly mediates recruitment, these assumptions no longer reliably describe how exploitative relationships initiate or manipulation and/or deception occur. Framing

AI-enabled recruitment as synthetic proximity focuses attention on how technology fundamentally alters access, reach, and control, and facilitates proactive conceptual understanding.

## **II. Protective Distance as a Constraint on Trafficking Recruitment**

Successful trafficking recruitment historically depended on humans' ability to access potential victims and create trust. Recruiters needed to reach potential victims, establish credibility, and maintain engagement long enough to secure compliance. These requirements imposed structural constraints: linguistic barriers, cultural norms, legitimacy markers, geographic separation, time required to build trust, and difficulty identifying vulnerable individuals. (UNODC, 2016; UNODC, 2018a; Europol, 2020). Taken together, these functioned as “protective distance.” This distance did not guarantee safety, but imposed costs and risks on traffickers, affecting whom they could target.

AI-enabled systems fundamentally alter this landscape. Large language models, generative media tools, and automated targeting enable traffickers to operate across linguistic, cultural, and legitimacy boundaries simultaneously and at scale, without corresponding increases in human labor (Europol, UNICRI and Trend Micro, 2020; Levesque, 2025). Recent reports from Anthropic show that bad actors used AI to perform 80–90% of their operational tasks with minimal human intervention (Anthropic, 2024). This operational logic is also seen clearly in terrorist recruitment, where ISIS “terrorist bot” networks on Telegram show systematic use of bots to manage channels, disseminate materials, and automate aspects of content distribution, evidencing movement away from human, locally embedded intermediaries. (Alrhoun et al., 2024) Trafficking-linked investigations confirm this trajectory. A 2022 joint investigation by French/Spanish police and Interpol demonstrated AI-enabled recruitment across multiple

languages and jurisdictions. Traffickers used digital platforms to present culturally and individually tailored offers. (Velasco et al., 2025; Levesque, 2025). Given documented acceleration in AI capabilities, traffickers can be expected to increasingly automate outreach, engagement, and coordination functions.

## **II.A. Linguistic and Cultural Distance**

Linguistic and cultural distance have historically functioned as natural recruitment barriers. Traffickers were constrained to populations they could credibly contact themselves or through intermediaries who shared the intended victims' language, local dialects, and subdialects. Linguistic fluency is not only necessary for basic communication, but linguistic and cultural familiarity also serve as proxies for social belonging, so errors in register, idiom, or tone that reveal outsider status could potentially trigger rejection, particularly in tightly knit communities and informal labor markets (UNODC, 2018a; UNODC, 2024; Toney-Butler et al., 2017).

Contemporary generative AI systems fundamentally dismantle these barriers. Large language models generate fluent text across dozens of languages and dialects, including informal and code-switched varieties (Costa-jussà et al., 2022; Adelani et al., 2024). Evidence demonstrates that LLM-based translation outperforms Google Translate (Aldawsari, 2024). These systems sustain ongoing conversation, dynamically adjust tone and register, and reproduce slang, emojis, and culturally specific references common in informal digital communication (Bender et al., 2021). For example, *Sheng* (Kenyan urban youth dialect) and Nigerian *Pidgin* have both been accurately reproduced by LLM architectures, creating trust signals through linguistic familiarity that are easily interpreted as social proximity (Bosire, 2006; Githiora, 2018; Adelani et al., 2024).

Large language models also generate domain-specific professional language with sufficient accuracy to deceive educated populations. Professional language, including medical, legal, and financial registers, has historically required years of specialized training and functioned as implicit credibility markers. Educated individuals rely on these linguistic credibility markers to assess legitimacy. AI-generated text now convincingly recreates this language and is able to satisfy these heuristics (OpenAI, 2024; Nori et al., 2023). This capability weaponizes professional language, enabling traffickers to impersonate legitimate institutional actors regardless of actual credentials. Evidence confirms this is already occurring in trafficking contexts. Recent evidence shows well-educated victims across Africa and Southeast Asia, including computer-literate multilingual graduates and professionals (OHCHR, 2023; Tai, 2023; Tower, Sadan and Nichols, 2025). If traffickers want to convincingly present themselves as medical professionals, lawyers, accountants, and any other professional register, they now have that capacity.

The erosion of linguistic and cultural barriers presents disproportionate risk where awareness of generative AI capabilities remains limited. Across much of Africa and Asia, digital engagement via messaging applications has expanded rapidly. In India, 85.5% of households have smartphones; in Indonesia, WhatsApp reaches 90.9% of the population (Economic Times, 2025; DataReportal, 2024). Yet populations lack frameworks to identify synthetic media, distinguish automated interactions from human communication, or recognize algorithmic targeting systems (UNESCO, 2023). This gap is pronounced where smartphone adoption has outpaced digital literacy programming, creating environments where technological sophistication asymmetrically favors malicious actors.

## **II.B. Institutional Legitimacy and Geographic Distance**

Historically, recruitment of trafficking victims has, in many circumstances, required demonstrable legitimacy: verifiable credentials, institutional affiliation, government-issued licenses, or an established community reputation. Legitimacy functioned as a filter mechanism, and recruitment attempts lacking recognizable trust markers were more likely to fail or attract scrutiny (UNODC, 2018a; UNODC, 2024). As a result, traffickers often operated through or alongside legitimate businesses to anchor credibility (UNODC, 2016; Jones, Visser & Simic, 2019).

Contemporary generative systems eliminate many operational constraints that legitimacy verification once imposed. Large language models produce professional recruitment materials, employment contracts, corporate websites, and supporting documentation consistent with sectoral and national norms, creating an appearance of established institutional presence (Europol, UNICRI & Trend Micro, 2020; Europol Innovation Lab, 2022). There is a stark example from the world of espionage where North Korean IT workers infiltrated Fortune 500 companies. Operatives created comprehensive professional identities, fabricated employment histories at recognizable technology companies, GitHub repositories with credible code contributions, LinkedIn profiles with appropriate network connections, and technical portfolios aligned with target job requirements, sufficiently convincing to pass Fortune 500 recruitment screening processes, inclusive of interviews (Anthropic, 2025).

Digitally mediated recruitment substantially reduces geographic distance as an operational constraint. Law enforcement analysis documents recruitment processes unfolding entirely through digital channels, sometimes over weeks or months before any physical contact or cross-border movement occurs (INTERPOL, 2024). In some reported Southeast Asian cases, victims were recruited through social media, underwent "training" via messaging applications,

and received employment instructions through encrypted channels before being transported to compound facilities for exploitation in online fraud operations, without any physical presence of traffickers. (ProPublica, 2022; INTERPOL, 2024).

## **II.C. Relationship-Building and Sustained Engagement**

Trafficking recruitment historically required sustained, personalized engagement. Establishing trust, assessing vulnerabilities, adapting persuasive narratives, and maintaining communication demanded continuous human attention (UNODC, 2018a; UNODC, 2020; Council of Europe, 2022). These relationships often form a key part of the control of victims (UNODC, 2018a) The time required to build exploitative relationships functioned as a natural limiting mechanism. Human attention is finite, and a natural limitation to the number of concurrent conversations that can take place. Grooming processes unfolded over weeks or months, requiring recruiters to review or remember prior conversations, maintain narrative consistency, and adapt tactics based on victim responses (Murphy et al., 2021; Cecchet & Thoburn, 2014). Each active recruitment consumed cognitive resources, creating practical limits on operational scale. Operations requiring sustained engagement necessitated multiple human recruiters or sequential rather than parallel processes (Europol, 2020; Council of Europe, 2022).

Contemporary AI systems fundamentally eliminate attention as a limiting constraint. Large language models sustain simultaneous conversations across dozens or hundreds of targets, maintaining context-specific engagement without human oversight (OpenAI, 2024; Anthropic, 2024; Bommasani et al., 2021). These systems are capable of tracking prior interactions, adapting responses based on conversation history, and generating contextually appropriate replies simulating genuine human attention. Critically, AI-enabled engagement operates

continuously across time zones. These systems respond within seconds, sustaining engagement intensity physically impossible for human operators (Stanford HAI, 2025).

AI systems enable personalized parallel engagement. Natural language processing allows automated analysis of victim responses, identification of psychological vulnerabilities, and real-time adaptation of persuasive tactics (Bender et al., 2021; Weidinger et al., 2022). AI chatbots are able to detect linguistic markers of financial stress, emotional vulnerability, or social isolation and adjust recruitment narratives accordingly, while maintaining dozens of distinct, individually tailored conversations simultaneously. Rather than broadcasting generic offers, AI-enabled systems are capable of individualized outreach, conducting personalized needs assessments, and tailor employment offers to victim-specific circumstances (EL PACCTO, 2025; Levesque, 2025). AI effectively transforms personalized engagement from a high-cost, labor-intensive process into an automated, scalable function. And it can do so across, languages, cultures, and contexts, all while making the activities harder to identify and track for law enforcement (Levesque, 2025).

### **III. Synthetic Proximity as a Trafficking Mechanism**

These protective distances collapse simultaneously, not sequentially. Their convergent elimination enables traffickers to project functional closeness (including linguistic fluency, cultural familiarity, institutional legitimacy, and sustained attention) across populations they have no genuine connection to. This operational capability is synthetic proximity.

#### ***III.A. Defining Synthetic Proximity***

“Synthetic proximity” is the ability for bad actors to create functional closeness, including linguistic, cultural, relational, and institutional proximity to victims (among others). It describes the cumulative effect of AI capabilities operating together to eliminate distances that historically constrained exploitative access. Synthetic proximity systematically erodes frictions that once limited reach, persuasion methods, and control mechanisms.

Three characteristics define synthetic proximity:

- **Manufactured legitimacy:** AI-generated credibility markers that historically required genuine social embedding or institutional affiliation.
- **Scalable intimacy:** Personalized, sustained engagement across multiple targets simultaneously without corresponding increases in human labor.
- **Distance-independent access:** Traffickers can initiate contact, establish trust, and maintain control across regions and populations they have no genuine connection to.

### ***III.B. Synthetic Proximity as Constitutive Mechanism***

Synthetic proximity is not incidental to trafficking operations, it is increasingly constitutive of how recruitment and control are initiated, normalized, and sustained. This distinction matters. Incidental technologies improve existing processes without changing fundamental structure. Constitutive technologies alter conditions under which exploitation becomes possible, changing who can be targeted, what recruitment pathways exist, and how quickly control can be established.

Evidence of this shift appears in emerging trafficking typologies. Cyber-enabled scam compound operations now recruit victims across linguistic and geographic boundaries, operationally

prohibitive a decade ago (INTERPOL, 2024; INTERPOL, 2025). These operations do not simply use digital tools to enhance traditional recruitment; they depend on synthetic proximity to function.

Existing trafficking frameworks were developed assuming proximity, trust, and legitimacy emerged through human interaction, local embedding, or established relationships. When recruitment can occur without shared language, when institutional legitimacy can be fabricated at scale, and when trust signals can be generated algorithmically, protective functions that communities, verification systems, and informal knowledge networks once provided are substantially degraded. Synthetic proximity, therefore, represents structural change in trafficking operations, not merely tactical evolution.

#### **IV. Implications for Anti-Trafficking Response**

Synthetic proximity introduces three systemic challenges:

1. Existing legal definitions and jurisdictional architectures were developed around assumptions of human proximity, rather than synthetic proximity;
2. Prevention and detection methodologies rely on indicators, that AI-mediated recruitment bypasses; and
3. There an increased need for coordination across sectors currently operating in isolation, given the speed and exponential prevalence.

These represent structural misalignment between regulatory architecture and operational reality.

##### ***IV.A. Legal and Definitional Challenges***

The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000) requires demonstration of specific means: force, fraud, coercion, deception, abuse of power, or abuse of vulnerability (UNODC, 2000; UNODC, 2013; UNODC, 2015).

These definitions presume identifiable human actors exercising direct agency. Synthetic proximity disrupts this by distributing deceptive functions across technical systems, human operators, and platform infrastructures in ways existing legal constructs do not adequately capture (UNODC, 2013; UNODC, 2015).

When AI systems generate culturally fluent recruitment materials, produce fabricated institutional credentials, and sustain personalized engagement without direct human oversight, attribution of deceptive intent has the potential to become legally ambiguous. Is the operator deploying an AI system liable for specific deceptions the system produces, particularly when those deceptions exceed the operator's own capabilities? Do platform providers bear responsibility for hosting synthetic recruitment infrastructure? Current frameworks provide limited guidance (Europol, UNICRI and Trend Micro, 2020; Weidinger et al., 2022; UNODC, 2024; Council of Europe, 2022; CDPC, 2024).

Traditional jurisdictional frameworks allocate authority primarily on territorial, nationality, and effects principles, alongside protective, passive personality, and universal jurisdiction doctrines (Ryngaert, 2015). Yet none functions coherently when recruitment occurs primarily through synthetic proximity. International mutual legal assistance mechanisms operate on timescales incompatible with digitally mediated operations. Formal requests routinely require months or years while recruitment pipelines operate across days or weeks (INTERPOL, 2024; Europol, 2020; Casino et al., 2022). Furthermore, no international consensus exists on legal treatment of

AI-facilitated criminal activity, creating jurisdictional arbitrage opportunities (Council of Europe, 2022; UNODC, 2024; CDPC, 2024).

Criminal prosecution requires evidentiary authentication meeting domestic procedural standards. Synthetic proximity introduces authentication challenges exceeding most prosecutorial authorities' technical capacity. Establishing that recruitment materials were AI-generated requires forensic technical analysis that is often unavailable to resource-constrained prosecution offices (Europol Innovation Lab, 2022; Council of Europe, 2022; Sartor and Lagioia, 2023). Without reliable methods to prove AI deployment, prosecutors may be unable to demonstrate deceptive means elements required under trafficking statutes (Council of Europe, 2022; Europol, 2020; Sartor and Lagioia, 2023).

#### ***IV.B. Prevention and Detection Priorities***

Populations in high smartphone penetration, low AI-literacy contexts face disproportionate risk from synthetic proximity-enabled recruitment. Effective prevention requires population-level AI literacy programming targeted at high-risk demographics. Not basic digital skills but specific capability to recognize AI-generated content, identify automated engagement patterns, and verify institutional legitimacy when traditional verification mechanisms fail (UNESCO, 2023; UNODC, 2023). UNESCO's 2023 assessment found that only 21.5% of surveyed countries have integrated AI into national curricula, with concentrations in high-income contexts where trafficking vulnerability is typically lower (UNESCO, 2023).

Social media platforms, messaging applications, and online labor markets function as primary recruitment infrastructure for synthetic proximity-enabled operations. Yet platform providers bear no legal obligation to detect or prevent trafficking recruitment, unlike established

obligations regarding child sexual abuse material or terrorist content (Europol, 2023; INTERPOL, 2025). This accountability gap is not attributable to technical limitations. Platform providers possess sophisticated content moderation systems, behavioral analysis tools, and synthetic content detection capabilities developed for other abuse categories (Europol Innovation Lab, 2022; IBM, 2025). Current regulatory frameworks, however, do not mandate such deployment. Establishing platform accountability frameworks analogous to existing content moderation obligations would enable detection at the recruitment stage, prior to victim transportation and exploitation (Council of Europe, 2022; UNODC, 2024).

Contemporary victim identification protocols rely on indicator frameworks developed for traditional trafficking typologies: physical abuse indicators, linguistic barriers, visible movement restriction, and controlling third parties (UNODC, 2020; ILO, 2017; Council of Europe, 2022). These indicators function poorly for synthetic proximity-enabled exploitation. Victims recruited through AI-mediated processes may be educated, digitally literate, and voluntarily mobile, contradicting traditional vulnerability profiles (OHCHR, 2023). Systematic indicator framework revision is required, incorporating digital recruitment pathways, AI-generated legitimacy infrastructure, and remote control mechanisms as recognized trafficking modalities (UNODC, 2023; Council of Europe, 2022).

#### ***IV.C. Research and Coordination Priorities***

While direct empirical documentation of confirmed AI-facilitated trafficking cases remains limited, the analysis draws on documented AI capabilities, operational patterns in adjacent domains, and available law enforcement reporting (Anthropic, 2025; Conway et al., 2019; INTERPOL, 2024; Levesque, 2025). Direct empirical documentation of confirmed AI-facilitated trafficking cases remains sparse. Current trafficking investigations do not routinely

assess whether AI systems were deployed in recruitment processes (Council of Europe, 2022; Europol Innovation Lab, 2022). Systematic integration of AI assessment protocols into trafficking investigations is required, with international organizations developing standardized data collection instruments capturing AI deployment (UNODC, 2024; OSCE and RSO, 2024). Effective response requires coordination across four sectors that currently work in isolation. Anti-trafficking organizations have operational expertise but lack technical knowledge about AI. AI safety researchers understand how these technologies evolve but rarely focus on trafficking applications. Technology companies build and deploy the enabling systems but barely engage with anti-trafficking groups. Law enforcement agencies cannot identify AI use in trafficking cases because they lack technical expertise (Weidinger et al., 2022; Bommasani et al., 2021; Council of Europe, 2022). Creating formal coordination mechanisms, similar to the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), would allow these sectors to share information, develop detection methods together, provide cross-sector training, and advocate jointly for regulatory reforms (Europol, 2023).

AI capabilities advance faster than policy can respond. Emerging systems such as autonomous agents, advanced multimodal generation, and sophisticated behavioral prediction models will enable synthetic proximity tactics we have not yet documented (OpenAI, 2024; Anthropic, 2024; Bommasani et al., 2021; Stanford HAI, 2025). Anti-trafficking efforts must monitor AI capability developments systematically, assess their trafficking implications, and adapt intervention strategies before these tools are weaponized. The synthetic proximity framework contributes an initial analytical foundation for this proactive assessment (Weidinger et al., 2022; Bommasani et al., 2021).

## **V. Conclusion**

This article introduced synthetic proximity as an analytical framework for understanding how AI systems fundamentally transform trafficking recruitment operations. Synthetic proximity describes the cumulative effect of AI technologies that systematically eliminate protective distances (geographic, linguistic, cultural, institutional, and resource constraints) that historically limited exploitative access to potential victims. When these protective mechanisms collapse, they create a new operational environment that warrants conceptualisation.

The evidence demonstrates that synthetic proximity represents a structural transformation in trafficking operations. Traffickers no longer require local presence, shared language, cultural familiarity, institutional credentials, or sustained human attention to conduct cross-border recruitment at scale. These capabilities are not incremental improvements to existing methods; they constitute categorical shifts in operational possibility.

The implications demand immediate action across three domains. First, legal frameworks must address agency attribution in AI-mediated deception, jurisdictional fragmentation in remotely orchestrated recruitment operations, and evidentiary authentication of synthetic content. Second, prevention infrastructure must prioritize AI literacy programs for high-risk populations, establish platform accountability mechanisms comparable to existing content moderation obligations, and update victim identification protocols to recognize AI-facilitated recruitment patterns. Third, effective response requires systematic coordination across anti-trafficking organizations, AI safety communities, technology companies, and law enforcement.

Critically, these response requirements do not depend on speculative future capabilities. The evidence presented demonstrates that synthetic proximity already functions as an operational mechanism in documented trafficking cases. The question is not whether synthetic proximity will be exploited, but how rapidly existing frameworks can adapt to operational realities that

diverge substantially from the human-proximity assumptions shaping current law, policy, and practice.

By conceptualizing AI's impact through collapsed protective distance rather than cataloguing discrete technologies, this framework enables systematic assessment of how emerging capabilities alter exploitation conditions. Communities with limited AI literacy, regulatory systems lacking technical expertise, and prevention programs designed around outdated threat models face asymmetric disadvantage. The window for establishing prevention-focused infrastructure narrows as AI capabilities proliferate and operational costs collapse.

The anti-trafficking field has historically demonstrated adaptive capacity when confronted with operational evolution. Synthetic proximity demands comparable adaptation. What is required is recognition that technological capabilities have altered the fundamental conditions under which exploitation becomes possible, and that response frameworks must be reconceptualized accordingly. This article offers one such reconceptualization. Implementation remains the field's collective responsibility.

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