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Original Article

# Sextortion of Minors: Characteristics and Dynamics

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A B S T R A C T

**Purpose:** Sextortion (threats to expose sexual images to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, sex, or other favors) has been identified as an emerging online threat to youth, but research is scarce. We describe sextortion incidents from a large sample of victims (n = 1,385) and examine whether incidents occurring to minors (n = 572) are more or less serious than those experienced by young adults (n = 813).

**Methods:** We ran advertising campaigns on Facebook to recruit victims of sextortion, ages 18–25, for an online survey. We use cross tabulations and logistic regression to analyze incidents that began when 18- and 19-year-old respondents were minors (ages 17 and younger) and compare them with incidents that began at ages 18–25 years. Most minor victims were female (91%) and aged 16 or 17 when incidents started (75%).

**Results:** Almost 60% of respondents who were minors when sextortion occurred knew perpetrators in person, often as romantic partners. Most knowingly provided images to perpetrators (75%), but also felt pressured to do so (67%). About one-third were threatened with physical assaults and menaced for >6 months. Half did not disclose incidents, and few reported to police or websites. Perpetrators against minors (vs. adults) were more likely to pressure victims into producing initial sexual images, demand additional images, threaten victims for >6 months, and urge victims to harm themselves.

**Conclusions:** Sextortion incidents were serious victimizations, and often co-occurred with teen dating violence. We describe resources so that practitioners can help victims find support and legal advice and remove posted images.

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**IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS**

This research finds that sextortion perpetrators who victimized minors (vs. young adults) were more likely to pressure victims into producing initial sexual images, demand additional images, threaten victims for >6 months, and urge victims to harm themselves. Sextortion was often an aspect of dating violence. Half of incidents were undisclosed.

Media, law enforcement, and policy makers are describing a new type of online exploitation of adolescents called "sextortion." Sextortion is one of several terms (e.g., sexting, nonconsensual sharing of sexual images, revenge pornography) that have been used to refer to the nonconsensual, malicious, or criminally motivated distribution of sexual images via cell phones and other digital media. Sextortion in particular refers to situations in which perpetrators threaten to expose sexual images to coerce victims to provide additional pictures, engage in sexual activity, or agree

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to other demands [1]. Other terms, such as sexting (i.e., self-production and distribution of sexually explicit images via digital media [2]), nonconsensual pornography (i.e., distribution of sexual images without consent [1]), and revenge pornography (i.e., malicious distribution of sexual images [1]) may include sextortion. But sextortion is essentially the *threat* to expose a sexual image to coerce the victim into doing something, even if exposure of the image never actually occurs. However, sextortion is not a term that legally defines a crime in federal or state law [3,4]. Laws are changing rapidly, but prosecutions for sextortion often rely on other criminal statutes, such as those against hacking, child pornography, harassment, extortion, stalking, and privacy violations [1,4]. We use the term sextortion because it is employed in government and policy reports and accounts by the media that describe threats to expose sexual images made to children and adolescents. For example, reports by federal agencies have called sextortion an emerging online threat to youth [5–7]. News stories have warned of perpetrators who target hundreds of teen victims [8]. One report described prosecutions for sextortion, many of which involved victims younger than 18 years [4].

Despite concerns about youth vulnerability to sextortion, there is little empirical research about its characteristics and dynamics. Accounts of cases have largely described two contexts for sextortion. One is perpetrators who target victims they meet online. Some sources describe elaborate online scams with hundreds of victims by perpetrators who hack remote computers or use fake personas and other ploys to acquire sexual images from victims and then threaten them [4,7,8]. How often youth might face sextortion by online perpetrators is unknown. A 2016 report by the U.S. Department of Justice found that sextortion is the most significantly increasing type of online child exploitation based on responses by more than 1,000 law enforcement investigators and related practitioners surveyed [5]. However, the report did not include estimates of numbers of cases or victims.

Other accounts of sextortion suggest it often co-occurs with teen dating violence [9,10]. Adolescents report frequent exposure to physical and sexual violence within dating relationships, with annual prevalence as high as 21% among girls and 10% among boys in a national sample of high school students [11]. Also, many teens receive unwanted digital communications about sexual images from dating partners, with girls reporting higher rates than boys. One survey of 3,745 dating high and middle school students found that 15% of girls and 7% of boys experienced "sexual cyber dating abuse": pressuring dating partners to send sexual photos, threatening partners if they did not, sending partners unwanted sexual photos, or making other unwanted communications about sex [12]. Thirteen percent of students who visited eight school-based health centers reported sexual cyber dating abuse in the past three months, and 33% of girls and 18% of boys had received requests for sexual images from partners [13]. Further, teen victims of sexual cyber dating abuse were more likely than non-victims to report other forms of physical and sexual dating abuse [12] and sexual violence by a non-partner [13]. Cyber dating abuse and requests for sexual images do not necessarily include threats to expose such images. "Sexting" is common within adolescent romantic relationships and peer groups [14–16]. However, girls especially report feeling coerced by romantic partners to send sexual images, and they report more negative consequences for sexting such as exposure of images and harassment by peers [14–17]. The pressures and consequences that adolescent girls may feel about sexual images are also attributable to gender inequality, which generates attitudes that allow conquests by boys to enhance their status, whereas girls are subjected to harassment and shaming if their sexual explorations are exposed [14,17–19].

Sextortion victimizes adults as well as adolescents [4,10], and rates of intimate partner violence and cyber dating abuse are also high among young adults [20,21]. However, minors deserve special attention because of their immaturity and difficulty independently accessing help. Moreover, when youth are victimized by sextortion and teen dating violence, they may report significantly more health complaints and problem behaviors than non-victims [11,22] and face negative outcomes that will interfere with their transition into adulthood. Longitudinal research with a nationally representative sample of youth found that girls who were victimized by dating partners when they were minors were more likely to smoke and have symptoms of depression and problems with alcohol at ages 18–25 years [23]. Boys who were victims were more likely to report antisocial behaviors and marijuana use. All were more likely to report suicidal ideation and be victimized by intimate partner violence as young adults.

The goals of this research about sextortion were to better understand the contexts, characteristics, and dynamics of sextortion committed against minors and to determine if and how cases in which minors were victimized are more serious than cases involving young adults. We collected data from victims aged 18–25 years, recruited mainly via Facebook. Data about incidents occurring to minors were reported by respondents ages 18 and 19 who described sextortion incidents that occurred when they were 17 or younger (n = 572). These data were compared with incidents occurring to young adults (n = 813).

## Methods

### *Procedures*

We ran advertising campaigns on Facebook between July and September 2015 to recruit young adults, ages 18–25, who had been victims of sextortion. At that time, 82% of internet users aged 18–29 used Facebook, with 70% of users on the platform daily [24]. Facebook advertisements are an effective tool for recruiting hard to reach populations for social science research [25,26].

The Facebook ads featured images (e.g., people texting, the question, "Got nudes?") and text (e.g., "Sextortion. Has it happened to you? If a person has tried to make you do something by threatening to show sexual images of you to someone or post [them] online, please help by taking this anonymous survey. We want to stop this crime!"). Respondents clicked a link to enter the survey.

The advertisements were aimed at English-speaking Facebook users, aged 18–25, in the United States. Advertisements were focused at times to recruit respondents of varying educational levels, males, persons identifying as sexual and gender minorities, and 18 year olds. We targeted 18 year olds to increase the number of respondents likely to report episodes that occurred when they were minors. The University of New Hampshire Human Subjects Review Board approved all protocols.

We used Qualtrics Research Suite, a secure web-based data collection system, to administer the online survey. The survey took about 20 minutes to complete. An introduction explained that the survey was anonymous and respondents could skip questions they did not want to answer. The introduction and end of the survey included links to resources for sextortion victims,

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