

Exploring Online Sextortion

by Roberta Liggett*

In this article, Roberta Liggett explains how recent technologies using the internet and cell phones function as tools for sexual extortion. Her article focuses on several aspects of sextortion: how sexually explicit images are obtained, such as by hacking and by grooming victims, the methods by which the demands for sexual images are transmitted, such as the use of financial incentives or scams, and the motivations of the perpetrators, including sexual gratification and the desire to control victims.

INTRODUCTION

The integration of technology into sexual and gender-based violence has received increasing attention from law enforcement, politicians, and scholars. In particular, sextortion—or the threat to distribute intimate images or videos unless a victim satisfies a demand—has emerged as a prominent and growing threat to Internet users (Clark, 2016; Department of Justice, 2016; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016).

Despite the growing concern about sextortion, there is a dearth of empirical work on the topic. As a result, there is a lack of knowledge regarding sextortionists and their methods, which presents issues for policy creation. Specifically, a lack of evidence-based knowledge of sextortion can lead to ad hoc legislation that may not encompass all forms of the behavior, leaving specific individuals vulnerable and with limited legal options or protections (McGlynn & Rackley, 2018). Furthermore, a deeper understanding of how sextortion relates to the continuum of technology-facilitated sexual violence can point to more inclusive prevention and legal strategies (Henry & Powell, 2016a, 2016b; McGlynn & Rackley, 2018).

The purpose of this exploratory paper is to outline key themes present in a sample of open source sextortion cases. The analysis focuses on the actual

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process of sextortion, such as obtaining intimate content from victims, sextortion demands, and the motivations of offenders who commit these offenses. Exploring sextortion as a process can pinpoint areas where legislation may be lacking; outline definitional issues surrounding sextortion and how it may differ from other crimes; and identify new areas where prevention could offer a lasting impact.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Sexual blackmail and extortion are not new phenomena. A rich history exists of extorting individuals over intimate information (for a detailed review, see McLearn, 2002). However, the development of the Internet and the integration of technology into everyday life have changed the landscape of sextortion by increasing access to victims, creating investigative complexity, and globalizing the issue (Department of Justice, 2016). Widespread use of social media also means that perpetrators can collect information regarding victims' friends, family, schools, and employers with minimal technological skill. Using this information, perpetrators can bolster the credibility of their threats in order to coerce compliance from victims (Acar, 2016; Kopecký, Hejsek, Kusa, Polak & Maresova, 2015; Kopecký, 2017).

Extortion demands have also evolved past the normative financial motive of the past. Although money continues to play an integral role in some forms of sextortion, the most commonly cited paradigm involves targeting individuals, usually minor females, in order to demand sexually explicit images, sexual contact, or cybersexual contact (Acar, 2016; Kopecký, 2016, 2017; Wittes, Poplin, Jurecic & Spera, 2016b). Reporting on a national strategy to investigate and prevent child exploitation, the Department of Justice (2016) has continued to highlight sextortion as a growing threat to children around the globe. Similarly, several authors have begun to conceptualize sextortion based on sexually violent demands (Kopecký, 2017; Wittes, et al., 2016b).

Many victims also experience sextortion within a dating/intimate partner violence (IPV) context. Since much of relational and sexual behavior utilizes technology, it makes sense that there would be overlap with IPV through other forms of image-based abuse, such as revenge porn (Draucker & Martsof, 2010). Revenge porn is defined as the distribution of intimate content without the person's consent in order to harm the victim, who is often an ex-romantic partner (Citron & Franks, 2014). While revenge porn involves the actual distribution of images online, sextortion is primarily concerned with the use of threats to distribute sexual content in order to control behavior, whether the content is disseminated or not (Wolak, Finkelhor, Walsh & Treitman, 2018). This dynamic between threats and actual dissemination may signify sextortion's role as part of a larger process of image-based abuse between former partners.

Wolak and Finkelhor (2016) conducted a large-scale survey of 1,631 victims of sextortion and found that victims experienced a number of demands from their perpetrators. Although a large portion of victims received sexual demands, such as those for additional sexual images and online sex, 42% reported demands to stay in an unwanted relationship (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). Indeed, multiple research studies investigating technology-facilitated IPV have noticed the use of sextortion by perpetrators in order to control their victims' behavior (Draucker & Martsolf, 2010).

Sextortion also shares definitional overlap with sexting—or the sharing of intimate images or messages through mobile phones or other mobile media (Chafflen, 2009; Gordon-Messer, et al., 2011). According to the Pew Research Center (2010), about 13% of young adults (aged 18-29) reported sending sexually explicit texts to others. Among teens, about 4% of youth report sexting (Lenhart, 2009; Ringrose, Gill, Livingstone & Harvey, 2012). However, a more recent survey of 870 adults aged 18-82 years old conducted by Stasko and Geller (2015) found that 87.8% reported having sexted within their lifetime and 82.2% reported having sexted in the past year. Furthermore, a recent investigation into teens' use of technology found that 10% sent flirtatious or sexy pictures to another person and that the majority use digital technology to bolster in-person flirting strategies (Lenhart, Smith & Anderson, 2015).

Wolak and Finkelhor's (2016) survey of sextortion victims found that 71% of victims shared sexually explicit images with offenders because they were in a wanted romantic or sexual relationship. Although sexting can include a variety of positive effects—such as increased sexual satisfaction and connection, it also facilitates situations in which trust can be betrayed, leading to negative impacts and the risk for sextortion (Stasko & Geller, 2015; Gordon-Messer, et al., 2011; Ringrose, et al., 2012). Therefore, it is important to understand these behaviors on a larger continuum of cyberviolence that includes not only non-consensual sharing of intimate content, but also the threats to do so.

In fact, the extant literature focused on technology-facilitated sexual violence has emphasized the importance of focusing on a continuum of abusive behavior that resembles traditional crime with new technological tools (Eaton, Jacobs & Ruvalcaba, 2017; Citron & Franks, 2014; Henry & Powell, 2016a, 2016b; McGlynn, Rackley & Houghton, 2017; Powell & Henry, 2016). Since sextortion is associated with multiple offenses (Acar, 2016; Wittes, et al., 2015; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016), it is important to understand the nexus between sextortion and other forms of cyberviolence. This holistic view of technology-facilitated sexual violence can inform both research and policy concerning sexual violence, technology, and cultural change.

The purpose of this paper is to use inductive qualitative methods in order to analyze key themes present in a sample of open source sextortion incidents. Special attention was paid to themes related to the process of committing

sextortion. Initial codes were grouped into higher-order codes. These codes were used to develop meaningful themes related to obtaining intimate images (ruses), sextortion demands, and motivations.

METHOD

Using a similar methodology employed by Wittes and colleagues (2015), open source news and court documents were compiled using a broad key-term search of LexisNexis, Department of Justice press releases, and Google search engines. Key terms used to gather sextortion incidents included “sextortion,” “sex* blackmail,” “sex* extortion,” “cyber extortion,” and “online extortion.” Cases were considered for inclusion in analysis if they (1) included threats to distribute intimate images or videos unless specific demands were met and (2) occurred using technology, such as email, mobile phones, messaging applications, and social media. In total, 152 offenders were identified using this method. In order to supplement information on these cases, additional news articles and court documents were compiled on each offender using Google Internet search engines, LexisNexis, PacerPro, and online clerks’ offices.

Qualitative inductive methods were used to analyze data culled through the key-term search (Saldana, 2009). Initial coding identified key steps in the sextortion process. Higher-order coding was utilized in order to group initial codes. These higher-level codes allowed for several themes to emerge from the data regarding the process of sextortion such as obtaining intimate images, demands, and offender motivations. These themes are summarized to give a descriptive account of the diverse methods used by sextortion offenders. A discussion of the ways in which these offenders and their crimes are similar to other types of offenders in the “real world” highlights some potential avenues for future research as well as implications for policy and prevention.

OBTAINING INTIMATE IMAGES

Sextortion is an interactional crime that occurs as a process between individuals. The process can be categorized into several stages, beginning with how offenders obtain intimate images. Several methods of obtaining images were identified within these data.

Grooming

Approximately 50.7% (N=77) of offenders in this sample used a method known as grooming in order to procure images from victims. Grooming is a strategy employed by child abusers to prime victims for attack by building trust, sexualizing communication, and promoting silence (Craven, Brown & Gilchrist, 2006). This is consistent with previous research on sextortionists, especially those who exclusively exploit children in cyberspace (Krone, 2004; Acar, 2016; Kopecký, 2017). In the current sample, all offenders who

used grooming also offended against minor victims. This indicates that some sextortion methods are consistent with those associated with online child sexual exploitation and the production of child pornography (Acar, 2016; Department of Justice, 2016; Wittes, et al., 2016b).

In addition to grooming, it was common for offenders to masquerade as someone close to the victim's age in order to build an online relationship with the victim. Many offenders also used sexually explicit images of other teens and claimed them as pictures of themselves. The use of flattery, compliments, and friendships are ways in which individuals are groomed into sending intimate images. This is consistent with the extant research on offline grooming tactics, illustrating an area in which old techniques and new technology intersect and lead to unprecedented victim reach (O'Connell, 2003).

For example, Anton Martynenko targeted at least 155 teen males by pretending to be a minor female online. Martynenko would send sexually explicit images of a female in order to deceive victims into the belief that they were entering an intimate relationship with a teen girl. He used grooming to manipulate victims into sending increasingly explicit images. When victims showed discomfort or made efforts to discontinue communication, Martynenko would use the sexual images he had obtained to extort them for more sexual images and sexual contact.

This case offers insight into how grooming can exploit normative teen sexting and relationship building online. Although many teens use technology to build upon in-person flirting and relationships (Anderson, et al., 2015), teens also build romantic relationships online (Anderson, et al., 2015; Ringrose, et al., 2012). The sending of explicit images, or "sexting" may be highly normalized among teenagers (Madigan, Ly, Rash, Van Ouytsel & Temple, 2018), yet the opportunities for online romantic or sexual interaction are exploited by others.

Hacking and Theft

Another common method used by sextortionists was hacking or theft to steal intimate images (17.1%; N=26). Hackers and thieves used a variety of technical and non-technical strategies to acquire images and videos. For example, some used password hacking, a process in which they continue to guess answers to security questions in order to change an account password. More technically proficient hackers used keyloggers or malware to hack accounts, computers, and webcams in order to steal images. Finally, some would physically steal images from victims' phones or computers. In rare instances, offenders stole a victim's computer or phone and then began to extort them through email for more sexual images or money (N=4).

Many sextortionists who employed hacking also engaged in long-term cyber harassment of their victims. Interestingly, this was similar to a ransomware ruse, where hackers and thieves would threaten to delete accounts, continue to harass victims, or disseminate images unless victims complied with their demands.

Sexting Within a Romantic Relationship

In a small number of cases (12.5%; N=19), sextorted images were obtained within the context of a relationship, during courting or dating. In other words, victims initially provided images consensually while involved in a romantic relationship with the offender. The number of cases in which initially consensual images are used to extort victims may be under-represented in this sample, as they may have been classified as other types of crimes. Another issue with this method of obtaining images is that it may be vastly unreported to law enforcement and news media, due to the dynamics of the victim-offender relationship and the fact that images were initially consensual.

In most instances, sexual images were used in order to control the victim's behavior during periods of conflict, such as when the victim attempted to end the relationship. For example, Akhil Patel threatened to distribute intimate videos of his former girlfriend unless she broke up with her new fiancé and returned to the relationship. Other times, previously provided sexual images were used months or years later in order to extort money from former partners. These results support other studies that have found that sextortion behavior occurs within dating contexts (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016).

Scams

The fourth way offenders procured sextortion images was through scams or trickery (20.4%; N=31). For example, offenders sometimes promised payment for images; represented themselves as authority figures or as being able to provide specialized services (for example, as a model scout); claimed to have intimate images of victims; or engaged in webcam scams.

Many offenders who used scamming also worked within a criminal organization that conducted hundreds of webcam scams (11.2%; N=17). Webcam scams usually involve soliciting victims into private webcam sessions, which are then recorded. Offenders then begin a financial extortion plot, demanding that victims pay specific amounts of money. In many of the situations, the pace of the sextortion was rapid, meaning that the webcam session and extortion activities happened within the same day.

This group requires a special note. By focusing on offenders, many sextortionists who were part of transnational criminal organizations were not included in the sample because very little arrest, charging, and prosecution data exist on the group. However, many law enforcement organizations have reported substantial increases in this type of crime (National Crime Agency, 2018; Whitworth, 2018; Fox-Brewster, 2018). In 2014, a multi-agency take-down in the Philippines led to the identification of 195 individuals who were involved in webcam sextortion scams (Interpol, 2014). In the United Kingdom, 1,304 victims of webcam sextortion scams reported their experience to police in 2017 (National Crime Agency, 2018). Therefore, this sample was unable to capture the dynamics of sextortion within transnational criminal organizations.

While most offenders could be categorized as using one method, there are cases where offenders may not have one. For example, Michael Ford used both scams and hacking to obtain images. He sent out thousands of emails pretending to be a Google administrator, telling victims that their account would be deleted unless they quickly sent their usernames and passwords. Once obtained, Ford hacked victims' accounts, obtained images, and began sextorting victims. This illustrates how offenders may use several methods in order to obtain images.

SEXTORTION DEMANDS

Once images are obtained, the next process in sextortion is the demand. Offenders who engage in sextortion make demands in order to control and manipulate victims. Fully 78.3% of cases included a sexual demand, with the most frequent demand being to create and send additional sexually explicit content (71.7%; N=109). Within the sexual nature of these demands, several elements emerged.

Specificity

Offenders often demanded that victims create specific sexual content, such as taking pictures of specific body parts or engaging in recorded sexual activity. Additionally, fantasy played a role in what offenders demanded of victims. For example, a few offenders required victims to engage in highly sadistic acts, and others demanded victims to hold signs displaying elements of the offender's specific sexual fantasy. For example, Wesley Brandt demanded that his victims hold signs displaying their minor age with phrases indicating interest in incestual relationships with older men. In addition, offenders also sent victims specific pornographic images to recreate.

Victim Preferences

Offenders who targeted minor victims exclusively may be classified using the same existing typologies of sex offenders, specifically preferential and non-preferential typologies, which describe offenders who either display a strong preference for a specific victim type (*e.g.*, male children) or do not show a victim preference (*e.g.*, offend against multiple genders and ages; Lanning, 2010). For example, out of offenders who exclusively targeted minor victims (N=86), some strictly targeted female victims (77.9%; N=67), others targeted only male victims (17.4%; N=15), and a small number targeted both genders (4.7%; N=4). Therefore, victim preference exists among offenders showing interest solely in minor victims. This suggests that sextortionists tend to target specific types of victims based on gender.

Real World Contact

One of the most troubling findings was that offenders do not limit their offending to the virtual world. Offenders also demanded physical sexual contact with victims (18.4%; N=28), and in some cases a small group of

sextortionists demanded that their victims sexually abuse other minor victims or record their own sexual abuse (N=7). This may reflect other sexually deviant interests such as pedophilia. The ability of offenders to incite victims to act in the real world to cause harm illustrates the profound effect offenders have on victims even though their contact is mostly remote.

Financial

Similar to traditional, offline sexual blackmail, financial demands were prevalent in 18.4% of the sample (N=28). The majority of offenders demanding money from victims work as part of a transnational criminal organization (N=17). Oftentimes, offenders will extort large amounts of money from a victim and will demand payment through money services such as PayPal or Western Union. For example, the Philippines police estimated that one prolific sextortion gang was able to make more than five million dollars USD in a single year (Parry, 2017).

Controlling Behavior

Demands that occur within sextortion where the offender and the victim have been/are romantically involved are focused on tactics to control the victim's behavior, such as demands to talk, meet up, leave the area, or stay in a relationship (11.8%; N=18). Non-sexual behavior demands were most often seen between ex-partners experiencing relationship conflict. For example, James Krey sextorted his former girlfriend, threatening to distribute her intimate photos to her male coworkers unless she left work early to meet with him to talk, resigned from her job, and moved to town. Sextortion demands within the context of relationships, whether current or former, illustrate a perpetrator's need to control their victim's behavior.

MOTIVATIONS

Similar to the methods of obtaining images and demands, motivations of sextortionists vary. As evidenced from demands, the motivation for this crime is either related to sexual gratification, the need for power or control, or financial gain.

Sexual Gratification

Since the majority of sextortion demands are sexual, sexual gratification may play an important role in offender motivations. Specifically, some sextortionists may be motivated by sexually deviant interests such as hebephilia (the sexual interest in post-pubescent minors), pedophilia (the sexual interest in pre-pubescent minors), sadism, and other sexual fantasies. This finding illustrates that sextortion overlaps with other crimes, such as child pornography and online sexual solicitation. Indeed, at least 24 offenders who were arrested had child pornography collections that were unrelated to images obtained through their sextortion campaigns. Despite the similarities between sextortion and child exploitation, there are also distinct differences. For example,

not all child pornography offenders resort to sextortion of their victims, and not all sextortionists demand sexual content. Although overlap exists between these constructs, motivations must continue to be explored.

Power and Control

Underlying the majority of sextortion cases was a desire for power and control over victims. For example, Cameron Wiley, a sextortionist who targeted a female minor he was stalking in the community, messaged his victim to tell her, “you will address me as master.” Another offender who targeted stranger female minors, Nicholas Kurtz, messaged his victim “either obey or lose everything.” Cody Lee Jackson used intimate images of his girlfriend to control her behavior. Throughout their relationship, he was physically and emotionally abusive, giving her a list of rules that she needed to follow at all times. Finally, Michael Ford, an offender who hacked hundreds of women, stated to law enforcement that his primary motive was to gain power and control over his victims. In this way, sextortion is a crime motivated by power and control, a motive found in traditional conceptualizations of domestic and sexual violence (Marcum, 2007).

Financial Gain

The last motivation is monetary in nature. This is most often the motivation of transnational criminal organizations. News reports of these criminal organizations have pinpointed impoverished areas in the Ivory Coast, the Middle East, and the Philippines as being hotspots for webcam scams. For example, Maria Caparas, the operator of a sextortion gang in the Philippines, was a single mother living in extreme poverty.

CONCLUSION

Sextortion incidents are highly diverse in their methods of obtaining images, demands, and motivations. While there is no typical paradigm present in all sextortion cases, there are several themes in the process that the present study identified. Methods of obtaining images included grooming, hacking, sexting within romantic relationships, and scams. The demands of these offenders are most often sexual, financial, or to control the behavior of others. Within sexual demands there were strong themes regarding specificity of sexual content, real world contact, and strong victim preferences. Finally, when it comes to what motivates these offenders to commit these acts, it is most often sexual gratification, power and control over victims, and/or financial.

Sextortion appears to overlap with other crimes, such as revenge porn, dating violence, cyber-harassment, Internet child exploitation, hacking, and cyber scams. However, the diversity of these overlapping crimes converges into an overarching theme present in the results: power and control. Within the extant literature, motivations for power and control over victims are present in studies investigating other forms of intimate partner and sexual

violence (Brewster, 2003; Draucker & Martsolf, 2010; Marcum, 2007; Sullivan & Sheehan, 2016; Woodlock, 2017). In this study, power and control was exemplified through the entire process of sextortion, beginning with the manipulative strategies of obtaining intimate images and then using those images to control and terrorize victims. Additionally, these crimes can be understood as gender-based violence as most victims are females.

The gendered aspect of sextortion is grounded in power and control that manifests through sexual harassment and violence. For example, when demands are highly sexualized, offenders tended to target minors and women. This is consistent with research that demonstrates women are more likely to be victims of sexual and intimate partner violence than men (Breiding, 2014). However, when demands are financial, sextortionists tend to target males. Future areas of research comparing sextortion campaigns against women and men are needed in order to understand the gendered nature of this crime.

Another issue within sextortion is sentencing disparity; this must be addressed through legislation (Wittes, et al., 2016a). Prosecutors tasked with charging cases with adult victims and where images are not distributed have to rely on creative charging schemes that often result in lower sentences (Wittes, et al., 2016a). In addition, the high mandatory minimum sentences for child pornography crimes means that offenders who target minors receive incredible high sentences that do not necessarily reflect future risk for re-offense. For example, Carlos Davilla used an old picture of his former girlfriend to sextort her, but because the victim was a minor at the time of offense, he was charged with child pornography and sentenced to 180 months in prison. However, Michael Ford, who targeted over 800 adult females by hacking their accounts received only 57 months. This is important from a policy perspective, as legislation that focuses only on the sexual motivations of sextortion runs the risk of deterring victims who do not fit the mold of the “typical victim” from reporting their experiences to law enforcement (*i.e.*, adult women and men).

Very little is understood about sextortion committed by transnational criminal organizations. As a result, more research is needed to understand the sextortion criminal market and how it may overlap with other forms of cybercrime. Future research should investigate the ways these organizations make profits, and how cultural context, such as poverty, can facilitate hot spots for transnational cybercrime.

The present study is limited by reliance on opensource documents. Indeed, a large number of sextortion incidents are not reported to police departments and may never receive media attention. Yet this study represents an attempt to begin to understand known cases of sextortion and explore the process of this crime. The results indicated that most sextortion overlaps with many different crimes, which complicates the ability to implement policy. Policy makers must revisit existing laws and begin to integrate new information and practice that accommodates the shifting landscape of crime into online spaces. Conceptualizing sextortion as traditional forms of violence facilitated with new

technologies enhances understanding and can inform our cultural response to sexual violence in general. Prevention strategies that facilitate cyber safety are critical to preventing violence online and offline.

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