

UNDERSTANDING THE LINK BETWEEN SEXTORTION AND SUICIDE

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ABSTRACT

Sextortion is an emerging threat, facilitated by the use of online environments where perpetrators gain the trust of vulnerable individuals in order to obtain sexually explicit material and then use it to coerce victims for the purposes of sexual, personal or financial gain. There is presently no research exploring what may lead a victim of sextortion to choose suicide. The present study examined three cases of sextortion and suicide. A thematic analysis of publicly available online material identified common themes in these cases: fear, helplessness, hopelessness, shame, humiliation, self-blame, general distress, typical antecedents of suicidal behaviour. The implications are discussed.

Key words – Sextortion, cyber-bullying, suicide, suicidal behaviour, hopelessness, cyber-dangers.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sextortion is not a new word; it stems from a very old concept – an amalgam of sex and extortion (International Association of Women Judges, 2012; Europol, 2017a) and appeared in news reports back in 2010 (Colberg, 2010; Kennedy, 2010). In this study, we will examine sextortion in online incidents although, of course, sextortion can also occur offline, such as in the workplace (Wittes et al., 2016).

There are many definitions of sextortion in use. It is often referred to as online sexual coercion and extortion or exploitation and has been equated with terms such as sexting, non-consensual sharing of sexual images, online blackmail and revenge pornography (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016; Wolak, Finkelhor, Walsh & Treitman, 2016). Humelnicu (2016) defined it as a form of “sexual exploitation through blackmail” involving the threat to publish sexually explicit pictures, if the targeted individual does not fulfil certain demands, such as sending more pictures to paying money. Although Europol (2017a) discourages the use of the term saying the term is too ambiguous, agencies such as Interpol, FBI and the National Crime Agency (NCA) all use the term sextortion.

Legally speaking, there is no crime called sextortion. Prosecutions involving sextortion are usually made under different offenses such as hacking, blackmail, child pornography, harassment, extortion, stalking and privacy violations, which can result in disproportionate and unfair sentencing for perpetrators (Wittes et al., 2016; Wolak et al., 2018).

1.1. Literature

With today’s young people embracing technological advances at an unprecedented rate, perpetrators specifically target those who often post personal content online and undertake live-streaming video activity (FBI, 2015). The

prevalence of social networking as a means of communication has created space for increasing cyber threats targeting vulnerable young people (Açar, 2016; Livingstone & Smith, 2014). Sextortion, can have a devastating effect on those targeted and ultimately lead them to commit suicide (NCA, 2018), and many others may experience adverse emotional and psychological consequences (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016).

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), there has been a sharp increase in sextortion against young people in the USA, becoming one of the leading dangers online (Lynch, 2016; U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). The National Crime Agency (NCA) reports a similar increase in the UK where the number of sextortion cases increased threefold from 2015 to 2017. However, the real number of those falling victim to online sextortion is thought to be much higher as victims fail to report such incidents to the authorities (NCA, 2018). Sextortion cases are also appearing in various parts of Asia. In Indonesia, Dipa (2018) reported on victims across Indonesia as well as Saudi Arabia. In Hong Kong, Chan (2013) reported a seven-fold increase in cases in early 2013, in comparison to 2012.

Sextortion most commonly occurs via social networking sites, messaging applications and video chats. In their survey, Wolak and Finkelhor (2016) reported that for 54% of respondents, sextortion occurred on social media networks, such as Facebook or Instagram followed by 41% being sextorted on messaging platforms such as Snapchat, and 45% of respondents reported contact on more than one platform. In the 78 cases studied by Wittes et al. (2016), 91% of the cases occurred on social media, with the majority of victims being under 18.

Wolak et al.'s (2018) survey reported 27% of minors had endured threats for more than six months followed by 17% who had endured threats for less than a week.

Wolak and Finkelhor (2016) reported perpetrators carrying out their threats in 44% of cases, most often by posting the images obtained online, sending them to people that knew the respondent or posting fake images that appeared to depict them. In 60% of cases of online perpetrators who had carried out the threats also stalked the respondents online.

Various motives for why perpetrators resort to online sextortion have been proposed. For example, in NCEMC'S (2016) study, three primary motives were identified: to acquire more sexually explicit material (78%), to obtain money or goods (7%) or to have sex with the victim (5%). Wolak and Finkelhor (2016) found that the majority of respondents (51%) indicated the perpetrator wanted additional sexual images or videos whilst 24% reported the perpetrator wanted to have sex and only 9% wanted money. In contrast to these figures, the majority of news coverage presents sextortion as means to extract money from victims (e.g. Cramb, 2014; Marsh, 2017; Tharoor, 2014), which indicates a rise in organised sextortion crime (NCA, 2018). Determining a perpetrator's profile is not easy as technology allows perpetrators to remain anonymous and use deceptive strategies to commit their crimes.

Children and adolescents are the most vulnerable as they are easily manipulated due to their willingness to post personal content online making them easy targets (Humelnicu, 2016). The most common victims tend to be female although males have also frequently been victimised (Wittes et al. 2016; Wolak et al., 2018). So far only a small number of victim characteristics and risk factors have been cited (Europol, 2017b):

- Frequent use of social networks and other online communication methods, particularly mobile devices;

- Tendency to engage in risky online behaviour, i.e. uploading personal content, live-streaming video, web chatting and befriending strangers;
- Significant amount of time spent online every day;
- Comfortable engaging in sexual communications/interactions online;
- Naïve interpersonally (e.g. socially vulnerability, youthful neediness) or technically (online safety);
- Open to over-sharing, including self-generated sexual material;
- Absence of/poor parental control.

Wolak and Finkelhor (2016) documented victims suffering psychologically, with 24% seeking help with a mental health practitioner and 12% relocating to a new area as a result. Wolak et al. (2018) reported 29% of minors seeking help and 10% relocating due to fear of stalking, fear of the perpetrator hurting their family or due to sheer embarrassment of images being made public. The victims often enter a downward spiral of despair, social isolation and perpetual fear of the next demand or threat, which may eventually result in self-harm and suicide (Brody, 2015; Wittes et al, 2016). The shame and helplessness experienced by victims can make them reluctant to disclose the abuse and ask for help. Wolak et al. (2018) found that 50% of victims under 18 did not disclose the victimisation to a family member or friend, mostly due to shame and the fear of repercussions, while only 13% reported the victimisation to the police.

The majority of child sexual exploitation experts reviewed by Europol (2017a) affirmed that the child's ordeal had led them to engage in or threaten self-harm or suicide. The NCEMC (2016) review of CyberTipline reports saw one in three children engaging in self-harm or having attempted suicide. The NCA (2018) reported that five suicides in the UK had already been linked to sextortion. Sextortion is related to

bullying, and research has consistently shown that cyber and offline bullying frequently results in suicidal thoughts, attempts and suicides (e.g., Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Nikolaou, 2017).

1.2. Aim and Rationale of the Present Study

Understanding the impact of victimisation is important so that service providers can provide appropriate services to victims and their needs following trauma. Research into sextortion victimisation has provided some insight into the emotional and psychological effects that individuals, families and friends may suffer (see Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016) but it is still not clear how sextortion leads to suicide. Given the gaps in current literature related to sextortion, the present study sought to examine the reactions of victims to sextortion that increase the risk of suicide by examining cases of online cases of sextortion that led to the death by suicide of the victim. Finally, taking into account previous literature (Brody, 2015; Europol, 2017a; NCEMC, 2016; NCA, 2018; Wittes et al., 2016; Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016; Wolak et al., 2018), indicating that sextortion frequently leads to self-harm and suicide, it is expected that common antecedents to suicide will result from the analysis of the utilised cases in this study.

2. METHOD

2.1. Cases Identification

To identify cases of sextortion leading to suicide, a search on Google search and YouTube was conducted using a combination of relevant terms such as “sextortion”, “suicide”, “webcam blackmail”, “young victims”, and “sextortion AND/OR resulting in suicide”. Only three cases were significantly talked about in the media, following the victims’ suicide: the case of Amanda Todd, Daniel Perry and Ronan Hughes. The Google search generated news reports from various news outlets

(e.g. BBC News, The Guardian, The Times), which were then used for data collection. These reports mentioned instances where sextortion had resulted in suicide but did not provide further information.

The news reports on Amanda Todd talked about a YouTube video created by the aforementioned victim one month prior to her suicide. Thus, to try and supplement the news reports, a YouTube search was carried out, using the names of the three victims plus the same combination of search words used for the Google search. This generated more content on Amanda Todd, including an interview with her mother, but no content on the other two cases. Therefore, it was decided to use a combination of discovered YouTube videos and news reports containing most information on each case. Finally, it should be mentioned that search engines are powerful, easy to use tools capable of providing all kinds of information (Wang, Wu, Luo, Zhang & Dong, 2017), and were considered the most appropriate and direct way to find data on any possible victims of sextortion resulting in suicide.

2.2. Data Analysis

To accomplish the aim stated above, a thematic analysis of publicly available material of these cases was used to discover themes associated with suicide and how they may have originated by being subjected to sextortion. Thematic analysis is a rigorous qualitative method of unearthing, analysing, organising and dissecting themes from data to provide a detailed description of possible patterns to answer particular research questions. Despite criticism, thematic analysis can be used across a range of research processes and epistemologies to give useful psychological interpretations of data as well as generate any unanticipated insights (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Braun & Clarke, 2006). To best generate themes and descriptive insights into a

poorly researched phenomenon, a step-by-step approach was used, similar to that proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

The selected source material was imported into QSR Nvivo 11 for Mac (QSR International, 2018), a qualitative data analysis software package used for coding, accessing text, displaying completed codes, writing memos and presenting results in graphical form (Oliveira, Bitencourt, Santos & Teixeira, 2015).

A deductive and step-by-step approach was used to guide the thematic analysis for this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved first engaging with the data gathered by transcribing the Amanda and Carol Todd YouTube videos, reading and re-reading source material and noting down any initial thoughts, followed by generating preliminary codes based on the theoretical understanding of suicide and its antecedents including codes relating to sextortion and its consequences. Data were collated in accordance to these codes and themes were defined after reviewing the source material. A theme had to contain a certain level of pattern or meaning within the data in relation to the research aim (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Further coding took place to make sure no codes were missed earlier. To create the codes, previous literature was taken into account; some indicative examples are psychological distress (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016), social isolation (Brody, 2015; Wittes et al, 2016), shame and helplessness (Wolak et al., 2018), and self-harm (NCEMC, 2016).

The themes were collated and then categorised into Common and Non-common themes. Themes that were common in at least two of the three cases were classified as Common themes. Non-common themes resulted from the cases, individually.

3. RESULTS

3.1. Amanda Todd

In September 2012, 15-year-old Amanda Todd from British Columbia, Canada posted an eight-minute video on YouTube called “My Story: Struggling, Bullying, Suicide, Self-harm” (Todd, 2012). Amanda never spoke in the black and white video but used flashcards to detail her tragic experience. One month after the video was uploaded, she died by suicide (Farrall, 2015).

In 2010, she had moved in with her father and started Grade 7. She spent time in webcam chat rooms and was contacted by an unknown individual posing as a young boy (CBC News, 2017), with whom she started building an online, and what she thought, trusting relationship. Influenced by his flattering compliments, she exposed her breasts on camera (Smith, 2016). The individual, who was recently identified as a Dutch man in his thirties named Aydin Coban took a photo of her webcam flash. Not long after, Amanda received messages demanding her to perform a show on camera. He threatened in a Facebook message (Pursaga, 2012) to release the material to her family and friends if she did not comply. Amanda refused and was later visited by the police, only to inform that the picture of her breasts was circulating the Internet (Todd, 2012; Smith, 2016). The picture had been featured on a fake Facebook page made by the perpetrator to which her friends were added (The Canadian Press & Postmedia News, 2015).

The image sparked a series of ugly events: relentless bullying by her peers, online harassment and physical assaults (Farrall, 2015). Amanda moved and changed schools, but the perpetrator kept stalking her online, befriended all her new school friends and forwarded the photo of her breasts. She was subjected to slut shaming

with hate pages and memes spreading across the Internet smearing her reputation and telling her to kill herself (Bleaney, 2012; Farrall, 2015).

The cyber-bullying and constant harassment resulted in depression; Amanda became withdrawn, anxious, began to use drugs and alcohol and attempted to die by suicide by drinking bleach. Upon hospital release, additional abusive posts had been posted on her Facebook page urging her to kill herself. Amanda's family moved again but the abuse followed resulting in self-harm, more suicide attempts and finally, five weeks after the release of her Youtube video, she hanged herself (Lester, McSwain & Gunn, 2013; Manning, 2012).

There is no indication of anyone trying to intervene in the 39 days between the video release and Amanda's suicide (Lester et al, 2013). Afterwards, Amanda's case gained worldwide media attention, reaching 16 million views.

3.2. Daniel Perry

Daniel Perry was a 17-year-old apprentice mechanic from Fife, Scotland, who died by suicide on July 15, 2013. An individual pretending to be an American girl of Daniel's age contacted him on Skype. However, Daniel was being recorded, while being encouraged into sexual encounters, by an organised group of criminals based in the Philippines. The perpetrators then threatened Daniel with the recorded material, saying they would send it to all his friends and family unless he paid money into a bank account (Carrell, 2013) or he "would be better off dead". After receiving the threats, he replied "bye" (Hartley-Parkinson, 2013). Within an hour of the last threats, Daniel jumped from the Forth Road Bridge outside of Edinburgh. He was rescued by a lifeboat crew, but died soon after (Cramb, 2014).

During the enquiries, it was revealed that in the months before his death, Daniel had been urged to kill himself by anonymous users on Ask.fm, a popular

question and answer platform site, where users can ask and answer controversial questions anonymously (Byrne, 2013; "Explained: What is Ask.fm?", n.d.).

3.3. Ronan Hughes

Ronan Hughes was a 17-year-old boy from County Tyrone, Ireland, who died by suicide on June 5, 2015, after being sextorted by an individual, now identified as Iulian Enache. Enache, pretending to be a teenage girl named 'Emily MaGee', approached Ronan in an online forum. The conversation subsequently moved to Skype where he lured Ronan to share sexually explicit videos and photos of himself. Emily MaGee then befriended Ronan using a fake Facebook profile. Next, Ronan received a message from Emily threatening to distribute the material Ronan had shared on Skype unless he paid an equivalent of £3,000 in bitcoin. Ronan realised he had been deceived (Conlon, 2017; Mooney, 2017).

The threats became more menacing; "You have 48 hours from now. The time is running out. Now you have 47 hours and 59 minutes. Do not try any stupidity; you'll only make things worse" (Mooney, 2017), "I will destroy your life" (Conlon, 2017). Ronan was reportedly terrified and confided in his parents about the blackmail. They contacted the police and were advised to ignore the blackmail and not pay the sum (Belfast Telegraph, 2015).

A few days later, the perpetrator carried out his threat. One of Ronan's friends contacted him to say she had received a link with intimate images of him. He called his mother and told her what had happened. She called his father who left work and went home to find a note from Ronan with the words "back field". He found Ronan's body in the field behind their home (Conlon, 2017).

3.4. Themes

Thematic analysis performed on the source material created themes that could be divided into two categories: common and non-common themes. A third category of Assumed theme was created as a result of a separate informal analysis (see Figure 1). The common themes identified for all three cases were fear, helplessness, hopelessness, general distress, humiliation, self-blame and shame.

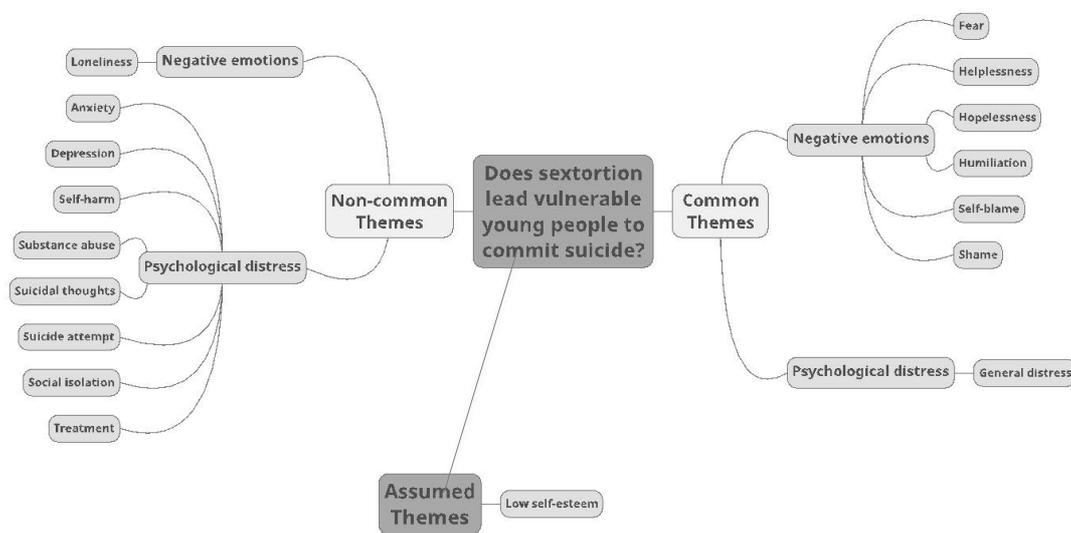


Figure 1. Thematic map of all themes discovered during analysis of all three cases.

The themes that were common between Amanda and Daniel were helplessness, hopelessness, fear, shame and humiliation. The themes that were common between Amanda and Ronan were helplessness, hopelessness, fear and humiliation. The themes that were common between Daniel and Ronan were helplessness, general distress, hopelessness, humiliation, self-blame and fear.

Non-common themes are relevant themes only identified in at least one case, and included anxiety, depression, self-harm, suicide attempt, suicidal thoughts, social isolation, loneliness and treatment. These were present for Amanda Todd because, for

Amanda, there was the detailed video confession that she recorded before her death. Her personal material gave some additional insights into the state of mind of a victim of sextortion prior to suicide. This allowed for a small, third category of an assumed theme not produced by the thematic analysis but inferred from Amanda's statements, that is, low self-esteem.

3.5. Examples of the Themes

3.5.1. Fear

Fear was expressed in all three cases. Sextortion victims often experience fear about waiting for the next demand from the sextortionist, fearing they will never stop or fearing the repercussions of sexually explicit material being released (Wittes et al., 2016). This was the case for Daniel (*"Within an hour of the threat and fearing for the repercussions he went to the Forth Road Bridge where he jumped to his death last month"*) and Ronin (*"Terrified and embarrassed, the teenager eventually confided in his parents and told them he was being blackmailed."*).

The fear of their reputation being ruined and fearing what the unknown perpetrators might do is overwhelming and can cause anxiety-related issues known to relate to suicidality (Capron et al., 2011). In Amanda's case, fear was associated with the perpetrator stalking her: *"I then moved...So I moved schools again..."*. Amanda's mother reported: *"Every time she moved schools, he would go"*

3.5.2. Helplessness and Hopelessness

All three cases reported feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. For Amanda: *"But that error couldn't be erased because it was on the Internet"*. *"She tried to change schools as a fresh start but... social media made it hard because wherever she went it followed her."* For Ronan, the police provided no help. Ronan's father said: *"He [the police officer] told us that he couldn't guarantee that. For*

Ronan, it was totally dismissive.” Daniel also fit this theme. *“He was left so traumatised by his ordeal that he chose to take his own life ” “He replied [to the perpetrator] with one word, "bye", and an hour later he took his own life.”*

The release of material on an online platform is near impossible to reverse (Europol, 2017). The concept of dignity and self-respect can be destroyed in seconds and as with Amanda, this followed her wherever she went producing feelings of helplessness, which may quickly have turned into hopelessness: *“Lost all my friends and respect people had for me.”*

3.5.3. Shame, Humiliation and Self-blame

Shame was evident in cases, especially where fear of repercussions or release of material was mentioned. For Daniel, *“...Fearing for the repercussions he went to the Forth Road Bridge where he jumped to his death last month.” “Knowing him as I do, he has felt embarrassed, horrified and has thought he's let everybody down.”* Here, Daniel decided to “hide and escape” from those who he thought would have found him unworthy of his actions and chose not to disclose the sextortion to his parents or police fearing judgment for his mistakes. As Europol (2017:21) stated, *“shaming...perpetuates the child’s victimisation and creates a culture that is not conducive to disclosing victimisation.”* In Wolak & Finkelhor’s (2016) more than 1/3 of the sample did not disclose due to shame and humiliation.

In Amanda’s video, shame shows how she experienced the whole self as wrong, a powerful driving force of suicidal behaviour (Mokros, 1995). *“It was my fault and my idea.”* She blamed herself for her actions, ashamed and humiliated of her photo being *“sent to everyone.”*

In Ronan's case, there was also an element of self-blame in the "*I've just committed social suicide*". As previously mentioned, shame in conjunction with humiliation have featured in young people's suicidal experiences (Fullagar, 2003).

In light of this, it is easier to visualise how shame and humiliation may have been potential facilitators to suicide in the above cases and it is important to note that self-blame is often felt by victims as a consequence of sextortion (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016).

3.5.4. General distress

There was some form of psychological distress in all three cases. For Amanda, this distress and types of distress was more discernible (see *Non-common themes*) compared to case two and three where there was less information available.

For Daniel and Ronan, the distress caused by sextortion was evident in their parents' comments that both boys were not distressed before being subjected to sextortion. "[Daniel] was not the type of person who let things get him down. He was a happy laddie, not depressed and the last type of person you would think would take their life". "...To think that Ronan was living life to the full and then all of a sudden something like this can pop-up and take his life."

This demonstrates the dangers of sextortion, including youth vulnerability, and how damaging consequences can lead to suicide. For Ronan the ordeal "*proved too much*," and Daniel was left "*traumatised*." Sextortion affects young people more seriously than adults (Wolak et al., 2018) and in these two cases, events escalated very quickly from spending time getting to know people online to suicide.

3.6. Non-common themes

This category contains those themes that were only present in at least one case. Amanda Todd provided the richest source material. The themes included:

anxiety, depression, loneliness, substance abuse, social isolation, self-harm, suicidal thoughts, suicide attempt and treatment.

Amanda's anxiety and depression are apparent in her video confession and began after her photo had been released on the Internet: "...*My photo was sent to everyone...I then got really sick and got...Anxiety, major depression and panic disorder.*" In her interview, Amanda's mother reiterated this: "*It brought out her anxieties and then her anxieties just escalated.*" The anxiety and depression became worse with time as the photo triggers a wave of school and cyber bullying: "*It brought a new round of comments from her peers and...it just spiralled her depression.*" "*My anxiety got worse...My anxiety is horrible now...Im really depressed...Im on anti deppresants now.*"

As seen by the *Common themes*, helplessness and hopelessness were also components of Amanda's negative outcomes and these together with loneliness are all known correlates of depression and antecedents in many suicide cases (Holland et al., 2017; Page et al., 2006). Amanda felt completely alone: "*Didn't have any friends and I set at lunch alone...I was all alone...I have nobody...I need someone.*"

There was only one mention of substance abuse in the Amanda's material: "*I then moved and got into Drugs & Alcohol...*" Social isolation is also a consequence of sextortion as mentioned earlier; not being able to speak to anyone out of fear of repercussions or as part of being bullied due to the release of material by the perpetrator. Amanda's bullying and rejection by her peers left her feeling isolated, anxious and more withdrawn: "*My anxiety got worse...couldn't go out...My anxiety is horrible now...never went out this summer...All from my past... cant go to school meet or be with people*"

3.6.1. *Self-harm, suicidal thoughts and suicide attempt*

Amanda was left in such despair after the release of the sexual image by the perpetrator that acts of self-harm extending to suicidal thoughts and attempts ensued, graphically highlighted by an image of cuts on a forearm flashed at the end of her video: *“I started cutting... constantly cutting.”* Amanda’s self-harming progressed to suicidal thoughts including attempts after school peers physically bullied her: *“She threw me to the ground a punched me several times...I wanted to die so bad...when he brought me home I drank bleach...”* This triggered a wave of further online harassment where pictures of Amanda were altered into fake advertisements for bleach, in reference to her first suicide attempt: *“People are posting pics of bleach, clorex and ditches.”* *“It killed me inside and I thought I was gonna actully die”*

3.6.2. *Treatment*

Amanda’s parents helped Amanda seek mental health support too: *“We provided her with when she was in need of, of support there was counselling available to her. There was doctor support available to here. Erm, there was school support available for her. Erm, we did everything.”* Amanda received treatment but the continuous online shaming and bullying prevented her from getting better: *“I messed up but why follow me.”* *I left your guys city...I’m constantly crying now... ”* *“Im on anti deppresants now and counselling and a month ago this summer.”*

3.6.3. *Assumed Theme*

This theme was not explicitly stated in Amanda’s account or in the other source material. However, a few statements in Amanda’s video implied a lowered self-esteem in light of her ordeal: *“I felt like a joke in this world...”* *“It killed me inside...”* *“Everyday I think why am I still here?”* *“All from my past...lifes never getting any better...”*

Amanda experienced a sense of worthlessness and hopelessness, characteristic of a low self-esteem (Hong et al., 2014), indicating that she did not think high enough of herself any longer, to the point where she did not believe her situation would improve. As mentioned previously, humiliating experiences can result in lowered self-esteem, putting youths at a heightened risk of self-harm and suicide. This in combination with the hopelessness, loneliness, depression and continuous bullying by her peers put Amanda at a severe risk for suicide, highlighted by her video confession.

4. DISCUSSION

This is one of the first studies looking into sextortion and suicide. It sought to identify themes within three high-profile cases of sextortion to see if and how they may be connected to young people committing suicide. The results outlined above have provided valuable insight into these contributing factors. Moreover, as expected, it was found that common antecedents were evident throughout the three deeply analysed cases in this study, which are further discussed below.

First, the results identified a group of common themes in the three cases which confirmed that victims of sextortion that have died by suicide experienced typical negative emotions identified as accompanying sextortion in past studies (Wittes et al., 2016; Wolak et al, 2018). The three cases indicated that the individuals experienced a significant amount of hopelessness, shame and humiliation and, for Daniel, the fear of materials being released was enough to distress him to the point of suicide. In Amanda's case, her hopelessness and helplessness are well-known antecedents of suicides (Holland et al., 2017; Page et al., 2006). In particular, shame is a potent risk factor for suicide. In guilt, one has behaved wrongly, and one can apologise. In

shame, people want to hide from others, and suicide is the ultimate way of hiding (Lester, 1997; Mokros, 1995).

Second, the thematic analysis identified a number of non-common themes in the source material from Amanda. The materials in case three were the most abundant because of her own posted video on YouTube and provided additional evidence into sextortion and suicide. Amanda's video confession detailed her mental health struggles following the release of her photo. She became anxious, depressed, and socially isolated which lead to self-harming and attempted suicide, risk factors for eventual suicide (Capron et al., 2011; Holland et al., 2017).

The assumed theme, low self-esteem, is important because of previously stated connections to suicide, cyber-bullying- and offline bullying (e.g., Hawthorn et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Nikolaou, 2017; Tzani-Pepelasi, Ioannou, Synnott & Ashton, 2018). Amanda's self-esteem was significantly lowered, especially as a result of the bullying that followed the release of the photo.

The size of the study sample affects the overall generalizability of the study. Although case studies are good for providing rich, in-depth understanding into phenomena (Tsang, 2013), three single cases for thematic analysis may be considered too small to provide data generalizable to the wider population. However, the lack of published data or material on victims of sextortion dying by suicide made any other methodology impossible at the time of this research.

The lack of publicly available data or material may be due to the severe underreporting of sextortion incidents making it difficult to realise its true scope (Açar, 2016; Europol, 2017). Even for the three cases that were identified, news articles often reported the same things and did not present details about the victims. In addition, the possibility of misinformation regarding the cases and the related details

cannot be disregarded, except for the video of Amanda Todd, prior to the suicide.

Relying on second hand sources often poses a risk; data collected from online sources cannot always be confirmed. Therefore the findings should be considered with caution.

The negative outcomes and severe consequence of suicide greatly supports the need for appropriate prevention and intervention strategies as well as further research on sextortion. These findings can contribute to prevention strategies that reach out to young people, parents and schools, to address sextortion, online risky behaviour, cyber-bullying, online relationships and the distribution of intimate material on the Internet. Such programs can give adolescents better awareness of the signs and dangers of sextortion, acceptable and unacceptable online communication, irresponsible sharing of sexual material (Europol, 2017a) and teach adolescents how to recognise unhealthy relationships by helping build resilience when under such circumstances (Wolak et al., 2018).

Mental health and medical services working with young people can learn from the results and understand how to assist victims with provide emotional support and advice (Europol, 2017a). The results of this research should act as a basis for indicating the best methods of support to address the negative outcomes at every stage of sextortion. It is also important to increase bystander awareness (Wolak et al., 2018). Family and friends are usually the ones closest to the victims, and since victims are often reluctant to disclose their ordeal for fear of being judged, the support system should be able to proactively recognise sextortion signs to address and minimise harm and create a safe disclosing environment.

Moreover, there needs to be an improved sensitivity by law enforcement agencies to victims of sextortion. Ronan's plight was dismissed by the police, and he

was told to simply ignore the demands. Police officers could benefit with training on the perpetrator's behaviour and helped to develop skills to avoid intensifying the sense of shame and self-blame experienced by many victims (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). Concluding, future research should examine in more detail the association between sextortion and bullying/cyberbullying, particularly considering the possibility of those two phenomena having common risk factors (Tzani-Pepelasi et al., 2018).

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