

# **Consequences of Online Sextortion on Victims: Findings from Open-Access Data and an Online Survey**

Rachel Fletcher, Calli Tzani, Maria Ioannou

Rachel Fletcher obtained a first-class Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology in 2022 (Forensic Psychology) at Nottingham Trent University, and a Distinction in Investigative Psychology MSc at the University of Huddersfield in 2023. She is a current PhD student researcher at the University of Huddersfield investigating sextortion, stalking and online criminal activity.

Dr Calli Tzani is a senior lecturer of Investigative and Forensic Psychology at the University of Huddersfield, Deputy Director of the Applied Criminology and Policing Centre, and the Forensic Consultant Editor of ADM. She is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society.

Dr Maria Ioannou is a Professor of Investigative and Forensic Psychology at the University of Huddersfield, Course Director of the MSc Investigative Psychology and Course Director of the MSc Security Science. She is a Chartered Forensic Psychologist, Chartered Manager, Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, HCPC Registered Practitioner, and Associate Fellow of the British Psychological Society.

## **Key Digested Message**

Sextortion is currently the highest reported form of image-based sexual abuse, a form of online blackmail which has been growing in prevalence since 2021. Research highlights sextortion to have severe psychological consequences, with over a dozen cases of suicide among victims. This paper used two transcripts from the media of victims' experiences, as well

as qualitative survey responses from an additional 99 victims, to explore in detail how sextortion affects victims psychologically. A main theme was low self-esteem leading to depression, within which feelings of hopelessness and negative thinking of oneself were prominent. Another main theme was paranoia causing anxiety, which was characterised by a loss of trust and feeling of not being able to escape.

**Key words:** Sextortion, Cybercrime, Psychological Impact, Victimization Consequences, Victims

## **Introduction**

In 2012, Amanda Todd committed suicide after an image in which she bared her breasts to a male online was used to blackmail her. The male demanded that Amanda put on more “shows” for him, otherwise he would share the image with her friends or family. Sextortion describes Amanda’s experience; a perpetrator blackmails a victim with exposure of their nude or compromised content. Amanda’s story was tragic and high-profile, but Amanda was not the first victim of sextortion, and she is not the last. Sextortion stands as the most prevalent form of image-based sexual abuse reported to the Revenge Porn Helpline (Ward, 2022).

Not only are victims growing in number, but perpetrators’ motivations are developing. Demands experienced by women and girls have a coercive or sexual element; to stay in unwanted relationships, end relationships with others, engage in sexual behaviour, and/or share additional sexual content (O’Malley & Holt, 2022). Minors are targeted in a similar way to Amanda, by strangers online with demands to produce additional sexually explicit material, contributing to the circulation of child sexual abuse material (CSAM) (O’Malley & Holt, 2022). Finally, while not much insight has been gained, we know that adult men and underage boys are increasingly experiencing sextortion as a form of cyber-fraud termed financial sextortion (C3P, 2022).

While motivations vastly differ, the perpetrators possession of the material to threaten the victim is the common factor. The few studies conducted highlight severe psychological consequences of sextortion on victims, such as fear, self-blame, anxiety, hopelessness, humiliation, and depression (Nilsson et al, 2019). Some victims experience fear, leading them to relocate or change school or employment to escape (Wolak & Finkelhor, 2016). Like Amanda Todd, more than 20 children have committed suicide due to sextortion since 2021 (Sganga, 2024).

This research aims to dive deeper into the psychological consequences experienced by sextortion victims. Unlike other research studies, this project uncovers the consequences of sextortion on victims of sextortion (those who are blackmailed into complying with certain acts in exchange for their images staying private) and victims of attempted sextortion (those who were blackmailed, but who did not comply with the sextortionists demands).

## **Method**

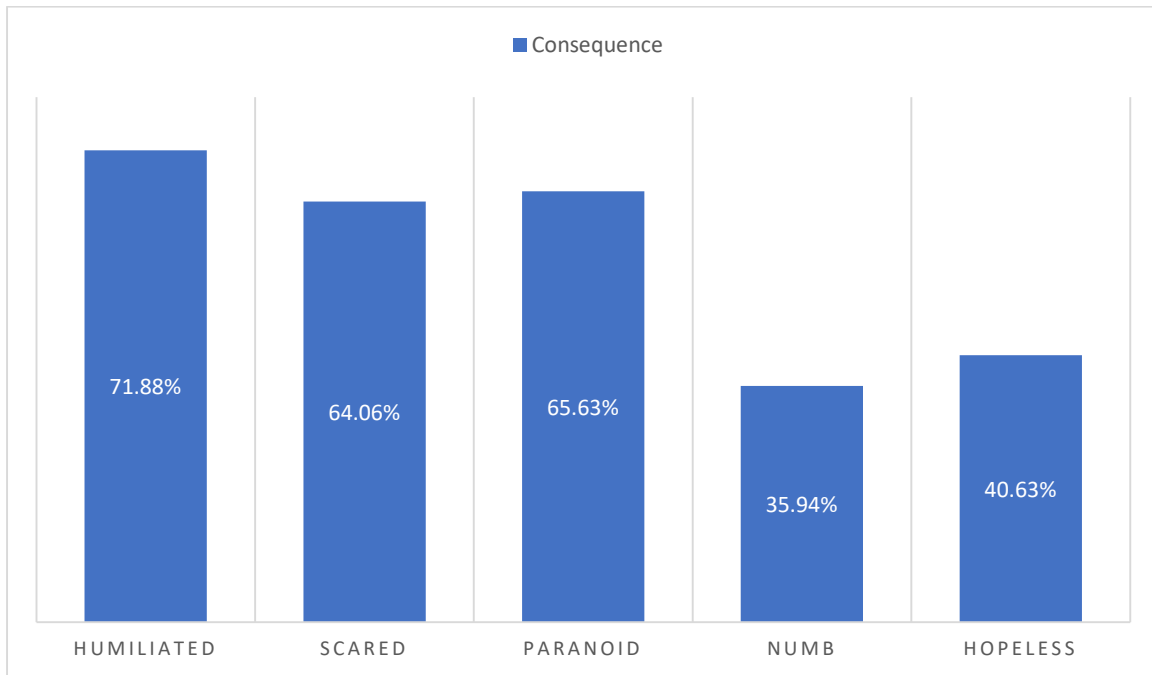
Open-access data sources and survey responses were analysed to identify the common psychological consequences of sextortion reported among victims. Ninety-nine qualitative responses (64 victims of sextortion, and 35 of attempted sextortion) were gathered via an online survey, and from open-access data, such as the victim accounts of Ashley Reynolds and Amanda Todd (FBI, 2015; Carol Todd, 2018). Criteria for inclusion, for both open-access and survey gathered data, was that the victim was speaking from their first-hand experience of sextortion.

## **Analysis and Discussion**

Previous research identified several emotions arising from sextortion (Nilsson et al, 2019). Participants in this survey indicated whether they related to these feelings after their

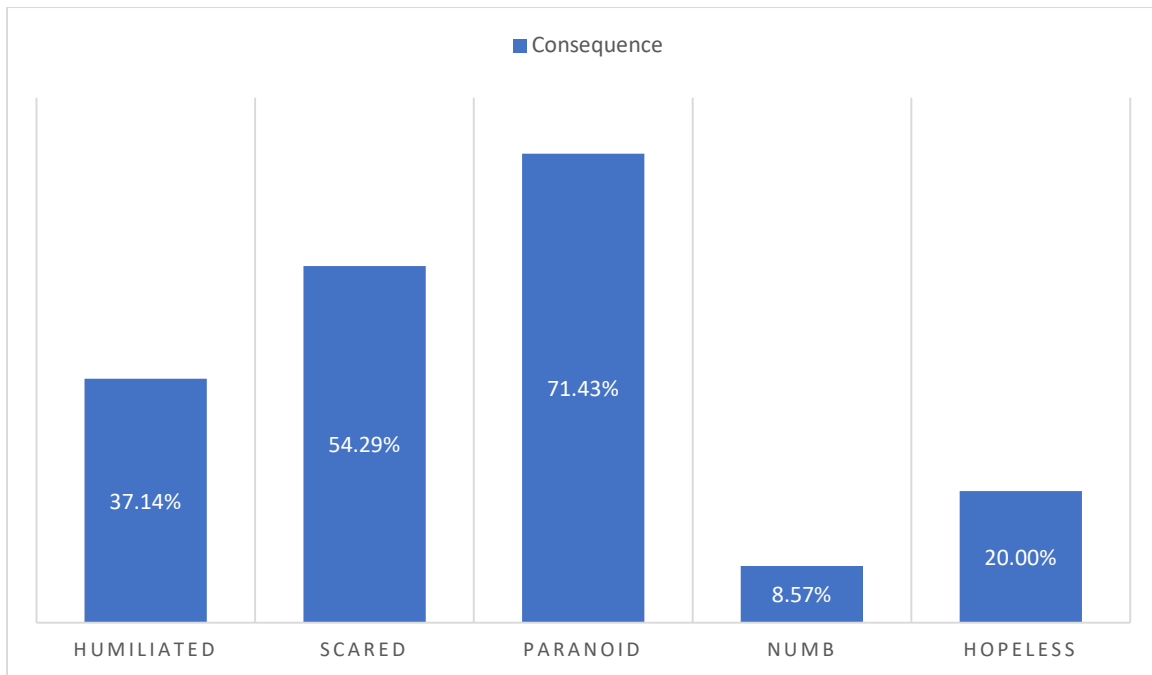
own experiences. The psychological consequences resulting from both sextortion and attempted sextortion are displayed in Graph 1 and Graph 2 respectively.

**Graph 1.** Reported Psychological Consequences of Sextortion



The most prominent psychological consequence reported by victims of sextortion (n = 64) was humiliated (71.88%), followed by paranoid (65.63%) and feeling scared (64.06%). All participants reported at least one of the consequences following their sextortion experience.

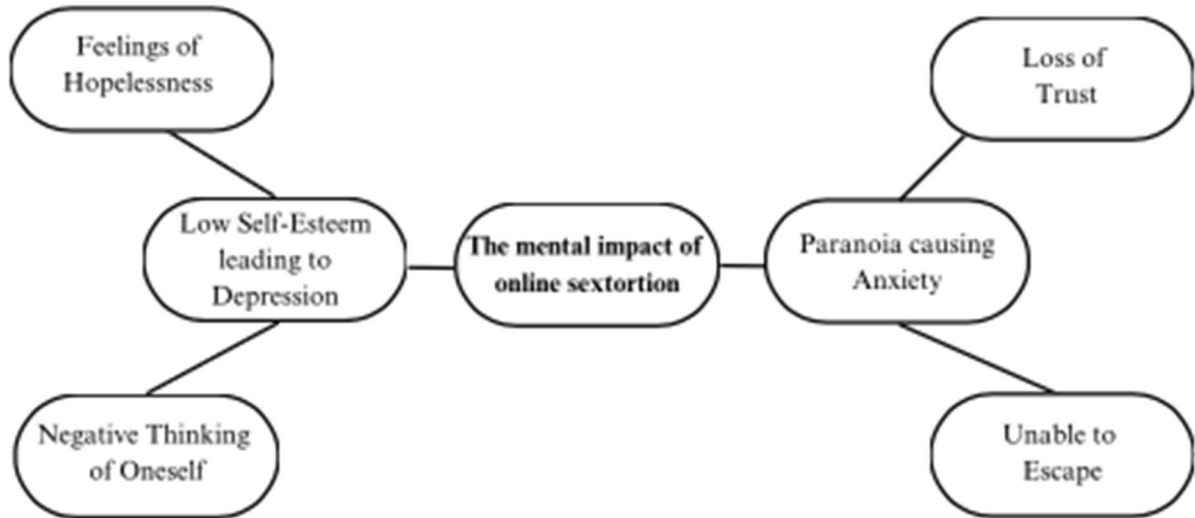
**Graph 2.** Reported Psychological Consequences of Attempted Sextortion



For individuals who reported attempted sextortion ( $n = 35$ ), the most prevalent psychological consequence was paranoia (71.43%), followed by feeling scared (54.29%). Significantly fewer respondents reported feelings of hopelessness or numbness compared to those who were sextorted. Attempted sextortion also caused fewer individuals to feel humiliated, which may suggest that humiliation occurs with the compliance with the sextortionists demands.

The thematic analysis of publicly available cases and sextortion victims' responses to the online survey were coded into two primary themes: (1) low self-esteem leading to depression, and (2) paranoia causing anxiety. See Figure 1 for a visual representation of these themes.

**Figure 1.** Thematic map of the impact of sextortion on victim’s mental health



### **Superordinate Theme 1: Low Self-Esteem Leading to Depression**

Depression is a term commonly used to describe symptoms such as sadness, pessimism, and worthlessness. This term was used by victims to describe their state after sextortion, for example:

*“I had my nights where I just felt – I really did – I just felt depressed.”* – Ashley Reynolds (FBI, 2015).

*“I then got really sick and got... anxiety, major depression and panic disorder... I’m on antidepressants now”* – Amanda Todd (Carol Todd, 2018).

Amanda Todd describes being put on antidepressants, suggesting she felt so low to the extent she sought diagnosis of depressive disorder.

Exploring why the sextortion experience induced depressive symptoms in victims so significantly, many participants suggested that the experience negatively affected their self-

esteem. Two subordinate themes were identified indicating self-esteem issues: (1a) feelings of hopelessness and (1b) negative thinking of oneself.

### **Subordinate Theme 1a: Feelings of hopelessness**

Forty percent of respondent victims agreed that their experience made them feel hopeless. The analysis of transcripts and qualitative responses mirrored this:

*“I felt like a slave. I had to make sure I had replied to every message. I felt like God was so disappointed in me, and I didn’t know what to do”* – Ashley Reynolds (FBI, 2015).

“Slave” indicates feelings of worthlessness, powerlessness, and little sense of control. Ashley says that she felt “God was so disappointed” in her, suggesting elements of self-blame and regret associated with the feeling of having done wrong. As such, the experience led her to negatively impact the way she viewed herself. She goes on to say, “I didn’t know what to do”, which was a common suggestion of hopelessness used across participants, for instance:

*“I can never get that photo back. It’s out there forever...I’m stuck”* – Amanda Todd (Carol Todd, 2018).

*“I felt like I was violated and felt as though I had no control or choice in anything”* – Respondent 31

Both victims felt there was really nothing that they could do to resolve or improve their situations. Respondent 31 describes feeling “violated”, which has similar connotations to the use of the term “slave” used by Ashley. Respondent 75, below, suggests a reason why victims of sextortion feel so hopeless:

*“When this incident happened, I wanted to tell the authorities but I didn’t think I would be taken seriously. I didn’t know who to turn to...”* – Respondent 75

Respondent 75 also says they “didn’t know who to turn to” and suggests that victims of sextortion might feel that this type of crime will not be taken seriously.

### **Subordinate Theme 1b: Negative thinking of oneself**

This subtheme recognises how the sextortion experience affected participants' perceptions of themselves, for some, long-term. As shown, humiliation was reported most frequently because of sextortion, which caused participants to think negatively of themselves. For instance, Respondent 1 shared that the sextortion experience “made me feel worse about myself”. Respondents expressed a struggle with self-esteem, shown most notably by the following quotes.

*“It ruined my self-esteem”* – Respondent 84

*“It made me sad and affected my self-confidence long term”* – Respondent 32

The description “long-term” suggests that the self-esteem issues developed from the sextortion experience were enduring, demonstrating that the effects of sextortion may continue for weeks, months, or even years. This is important, because long-lasting self-esteem issues are linked with depression (Choi et al, 2019). Participants also thought negatively about their behaviour, with one participant sharing they perceived the sextortion to be their fault:

*“...I thought that it was my fault.”* – Survey respondent 75

As such, victims of sextortion would sometimes blame themselves, further impacting their self-esteem.

### **Superordinate Theme 2: Paranoia Causing Anxiety**

Anxiety was another common mental health impact expressed in the analysed publicly available interview transcripts as well as our participants' responses. Specifically, victims expressed that their sextortion experience caused paranoia, commonly linked to the feeling of anxiety (Healthline, 2022). Some examples include:



*“... I was like, instant panic attack. My heart and stomach was just, I was like, I don't know what to do right now.”* – Ashley Reynolds (FBI, 2015).

Ashley's description of “instant panic attack” suggests that the experience had quick, perhaps physical, implications. Symptoms of a panic attack often include a fast heartbeat and feeling sick. These are symptoms which Ashley may have been feeling when the sextortion experience began, describing her heart and stomach. Panic attacks are associated with intense anxiety, which was also described in the case of Amanda Todd:

*“My anxiety got worse... couldn't go out...My anxiety is horrible now. Never went out this summer”.* – Amanda Todd (Carol Todd, 2018).

Amanda shares that her anxiety was so bad that it had an effect on her day-to-day life, she says she “couldn't” go out. This suggests that Amanda was so anxious that she felt physically incapable of leaving the house, which endured for a whole summer. It is apparent that the sextortion experience caused immense paranoia, not only demonstrated by 65.63% of respondents who selected this because of sextortion, but also by participants' quotes.

### **Subordinate Theme: Loss of Trust**

This theme recognises how victims became paranoid about men after experiencing sextortion. Victims feared that sextortion would happen again, which affected their trust in others:

*“It has made me feel less trusting of men”* – Respondent 4

*“Couldn't trust men for a long time”* – Respondent 23

Both respondents share that the experience affected their trust in men. It is possible that sextortion could cause an inability to form romantic relationships and healthy attachments with potential partners in the future, due to increased paranoia about others' intentions.

### **Subordinate Theme: Unable to Escape**

There is also a sense of paranoia around feeling like the sextortion experience is never going to stop. Ashley Reynolds shows this clearly:

*“I sent him all this because, one [day], maybe tomorrow I’ll get a break. I’ll get a day off tomorrow if I just do all these right. I never wanted to send them or give him what he wanted, but I wanted my freedom, I guess. So, I figured the only way to do that is if I do it right, but nothing was ever right.”* – Ashley Reynolds (FBI, 2015).

Where Ashley says, “maybe tomorrow I’ll get a break”, it demonstrates the longevity of sextortion. For some victims, sextortion can be a never-ending cycle of bribery, and it appears this way for Ashley. She says, “nothing was ever right”. Ashley previously described herself as feeling like a “slave”, and here she says, “I wanted my freedom”. With these phrases, it is clear that Ashley felt trapped. Another victim shared that their experience is still ongoing after three years:

*“He still messages occasionally on new apps / accounts to threaten me and it's been 3 years since”* – Survey respondent 34

This quote demonstrates how victims still have to worry that the experience is not over, even if it seems to be. Undoubtedly, this would contribute to prolonged anxiety, as victims will feel anxious that the sextortionist will be back. One victim also felt trapped by difficulty in reporting the perpetrator, which meant that they had to speak to the perpetrator directly:

*“The application didn’t do anything when I reported it, I had to speak to the person causing my anxiety to stop it which made the experience even harder.”* – Survey respondent

24

Respondent 24 attempted to report the perpetrator to the application, but they did not act on it. This has important implications for the need for better protection on online dating and

social media applications against sextortionists, particularly since sextortion is a growing online issue.

## **Conclusion**

The severity of sextortion cannot be underestimated, with victims as young as 13 years old, and psychological effects including low self-esteem, paranoia, negative thinking, and hopelessness, not to mention suicide (Sganga, 2024). Sextortion affects victims' perceptions of themselves, and many find themselves unable to escape from the perpetrator's harm. Yet sextortion cases are growing faster than research, policy and awareness of the phenomenon has caught up, calling for increased attention to informing the public of how victimisation can be avoided.

## **References**

Canadian Centre for Child Protection. (2022). An analysis of financial sextortion victim posts on r/sextortion.

[https://content.c3p.ca/pdfs/C3P\\_AnalysisOfFinanSextortionPostsReddit\\_en.pdf](https://content.c3p.ca/pdfs/C3P_AnalysisOfFinanSextortionPostsReddit_en.pdf).

Carol Todd (25 January 2018). *My story: Struggling, bullying, suicide, self-harm*. [Video].

Youtube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M5kVwW92bqQ&rco=1>.

FBI (7 July 2015). *Victim of Sextortion Speaks Out*. [Video]. Youtube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixAYkkub4Pw>.

Nilsson, M. G., Pepelasi, K. T., Ioannou, M., & Lester, D. (2019). Understanding the link between sextortion and suicide. *International journal of cyber criminology*, 13(1), 55-69. <https://pure.hud.ac.uk/en/publications/understanding-the-link-between-sextortion-and-suicide>.

O'Malley, R. L., & Holt, K. M. (2022). Cyber sextortion: An exploratory analysis of different perpetrators engaging in a similar crime. *Journal of interpersonal violence*, 37(1-2), 258-283. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520909186>.

Sganga, N. (2024). Family of teen who died by suicide warns of dangers of financial sextortion. *CBS News*. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/fbi-warning-financial-sextortion-minors-growing-threat-suicide/>. [Accessed 26 February 2024].

Ward, Z. (2022). Revenge Porn Helpline Report. <https://swgfl.org.uk/research/revenge-porn-helpline-2022-report/>.

Wolak, J., & Finkelhor, D. (2016). Sextortion: Keys Findings from an Online Survey of 1631 Victims. *Crime Against Children Research Center*. <https://respect.international/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Sextortion-Findings-from-a-Survey-of-1631-Victims.pdf>.