

'Sextortion' leads to financial losses and psychological trauma: What to look out for on dating apps

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

When malicious internet users gain people's trust to obtain sexually explicit photos or videos, and then use these materials—specifically the

threat of sharing them—to coerce them for sexual, personal or financial gain, this is called "[sextortion](#)".

Recent incidents of sextortion are not entirely surprising given the increase in social interactions online during lockdowns, particularly by way of [online dating](#). But they are concerning. Being a victim of sextortion is associated with significant financial losses (sextortion cost Americans [US\\$8 million](#) over the first seven months of 2021, for example) as well as [trauma](#).

Perpetrators of sextortion could be strangers who want to exploit vulnerable young [children or adolescents](#). They could be [former romantic partners](#) or members of [organized crime groups](#).

Anyone who [uses the internet](#) can become a victim of sextortion. Age, gender and financial status don't make a difference to the perpetrators—as long as the potential victim presents some vulnerability and a potential win. That means dating apps are an obvious setting in which users could be vulnerable.

What does sextortion look like on dating apps?

A dating app user with [malicious intent](#) might first gain the trust of the victim, groom them into believing they have found a good potential match, maybe engage in [some sexting](#), and then move to a platform that allows sharing photos and video calls (if the app doesn't have provisions for this), while continuing the grooming process.

The perpetrators may ask for photos or a video for confirmation of identity or verification of the "merchandise." If that doesn't work, in many cases they will send a photo of themselves or someone else to [lure the victim](#) into trusting them.

As they become more and more "real" to the victim, they increase their demands and ask for sexually [explicit photos](#) or videos. This may not seem out of place given sending nude photos online has become quite common. A US survey, for example, indicated Americans send [1.8 million](#) nudes per day, or 20 per second.

While a perpetrator may use the images to blackmail the victim as soon as they receive them, sextortion doesn't always occur in the first instance. Often people who receive these photos will send them to others. As a result, a victim's photo can circulate online indefinitely.



Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Such private material could end up in the hands of a sex offender who could use it to coerce the victim and ask for more material. It could end up in the hands of an organized crime group, who could extort the victim for money or other valuable items. Or it could end up in the online market where people buy explicit photos and videos, which could then be used for sextortion.

In reality, anyone who has ever sent a nude photo or a sexually explicit [video](#) to someone online is a potential future victim of sextortion. We can never be certain of how such material is handled, stored, used and even disseminated.

Consequences and prevention

Subject to continued fear of being publicly exposed and humiliated, some victims may relocate or stop using social media and other relevant apps in an attempt to escape their extortionist.

Victimization by sextortion can lead to psychological suffering, and serious mental health issues such [as depression and anxiety](#). Unfortunately for some people, continued experiences of sextortion can lead to self-harm and even death by suicide.

In [our research](#) published in 2019, my colleagues and I looked at three cases in which a victim of ongoing sextortion died by suicide. We found common themes in these cases included fear, helplessness, hopelessness, shame, humiliation, self-blame and general distress.

To [protect yourself](#) against sextortion, the first step is to be aware of the risks, particularly if you're using online dating platforms. Refrain from sharing sexually explicit photos or videos of yourself with strangers.

I would go slightly further and suggest that sharing this kind of material

should also be avoided in a new relationship. While sexting can have [positive effects](#) on a relationship (such as increasing intimacy and sexual satisfaction), given the risks, a couple should establish a high level of trust before sharing such material online.

And what if you think you're being targeted? Unfortunately, victims of sextortion often attempt to ignore or comply with the perpetrator's demands, and don't report the incidents. This can lead to repeated threats, while the demands increase. And victims can never be certain that the material will not become public even if they comply with the perpetrator's demands.

If you suspect that you are a victim of [sextortion](#), you should not hesitate to report the incident to the relevant authorities in your region.

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