Effects of Cyber Bullying

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Rising 'sextortion' cases put cyber users on the edge

Video Calls, Chats Used To Blackmail Net Users

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Indore: Small chat on messenger followed by a video call with exchange of compromising messages two months ago, changed the life of a 25-year-old IT professional Shikhar Singh (name changed) who became a victim when scammers from the other end started blackmailing him.

Shikhar had been in a relationship with a woman for past six years but the recorded video call and subsequent harassment that followed broke his ties with her.

He is one of the thousands of people in India caught by a growing internet scam the investigators call 'sextortion'. Here the scamsters usually monitor activities of their targets online for days and weeks. After sifting through all the profile details, relationship links, profile pictures, activities and victim's habits based on the updates, a friend request is sent and conversation is initiated.

The woman on the other end sends objectionable pictures to the victim and asks him to do the same. In most of the cases, the video that victim sees is either a pre-recorded video or a completely fake one. While the victim imagines that he is chatting with a woman, there is a man who is texting him. They work in groups together.

Such scams wherein a victim is duped into performing a sexual act by unknown, attractive women, is rising in India. While women continue to be at the receiving end of revenge porn, online abuse and harassment, most of the victims are men, claim experts.

"In the past three months,

TAKE PRECAUTIONS WHILE SHARING INFO ONLINE

- ➤ Use least amount of information necessary to register for and using the site. Opt for nickname or handle
- ➤ Use highest level privacy setting that a site allows & don't accept default settings
- ➤ Make sure you cover web cameras of laptops, mobile phone when not in use
- ➤ Verify emails, links in emails you get from social networking sites. They are often designed to gain access to your personal information

- ➤ Be certain of both the source and content of each file you download. When in doubt, don't open or download any content shared with you

- ➤ Never post publicly your address, phone number, driver's licence number, Aadhaar number, PAN card or student ID number
- ➤ Only connect with people you know and trust
- ➤ Read privacy and security policies closely - know what you are getting into. Some major social networking sites actually say they will use or sell information about you in order to display advertising or other information they believe might be useful to you

Cyber bullying makes the victims feel extremely guilty

Q & A

Nirali Bhatia
psychologist

■ **How many cases of cyber bullying and sextortion do you come across every month and how you deal with the victims?**
I deal with a number of cases on a day to day basis through social media, over mails or calls. Most of the victims, who approach me, come with extreme suicidal thoughts. I first make sure that they are safe and then speak about the issue. We provide whatever technical help we can but once a video or a picture is uploaded, it is very difficult to take it back. So it's important that the victim is counselled in a proper way to deal with the situation.

■ **How does cyber bullying affect the victims?**
The impact of cyber bullying and sextortion on the victims is so severe that they feel extremely guilty. We have to put them on medications as the trauma is deep and painful. In one of the cases, the victim was so paranoid after the incident that he stopped using social media and used to think that people are staring at him.

■ **What should people do to avoid being dragged into such crimes?**
One should always stick to basic instinct and common sense to avoid such things. If you feel that someone seems suspicious, do not talk to that person. Even if you fall prey to sextortion or cyber bullying, remember that it's not the end of the world and you can be saved by right kind of technical and psychological help.

ten people have come to me with such cases as they do not want to approach police. Six of them were men," said Ritesh Bhatia, cyber expert.

Bhatia said that the crime 'sextortion' can be divided into three types – one which is done for physical relations, second is asking for more such videos and third is extorting money using the videos or images available. According to Bhatia, many cases similar to that of Shikhar have been recorded in the recent past.

The scammers also threaten to share the video of the sexual act with relatives or friends if the ransom is delayed.

Experts helping victims deal with such cases claim that such accused are part of sophisticated and organised gangs. While no police records are available on the increase in such cases in cyber space, cyber experts claimed that more than 50% women online have reported some or the other form of cyber abuse. "It can be anything starting from stalking, harassment, sharing obscene content etc," said Shaik Javeed Ahmed, cyber expert.

Meanwhile, for Singh, the story is far from over. Weeks after the incident, he continues to live in fear. "He has deleted his Facebook account and is completely broken," said the psychologist dealing with him.