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**Abstract** | Sexual extortion is a form of blackmail in which a perpetrator threatens to release intimate material of a victim unless they comply with certain demands. We examine the prevalence and nature of sexual extortion among a sample of 1,953 adolescents residing in Australia.

More than one in 10 adolescents had experienced sexual extortion in their lifetime (11.3%), one in three of whom experienced more than one instance. More than half experienced sexual extortion before the age of 16, and two in five were extorted using digitally manipulated material. Two-thirds of those who experienced sexual extortion had only ever met the perpetrator online, and there were important differences in experiences between genders.

Preventing children from being sexually extorted should be a priority for social media and messaging platforms, and should be a collaborative effort across multiple sectors.

## Sexual extortion of Australian adolescents: Results from a national survey

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### Introduction

Sexual extortion is a form of blackmail in which a perpetrator threatens to release intimate material of a victim unless they comply with certain demands (Açar 2016; Alsoubai et al. 2022; Liggett 2019; Patchin & Hinduja 2020; Wolak et al. 2018; Wolbers et al. 2025). Sexual extortion perpetrators typically demand money, additional intimate materials or sexual contact with the victim (Patchin & Hinduja 2020; Wolak et al. 2018). The eSafety Commissioner (2023a) received a significant increase in reports of sexual extortion in the first quarter of 2023, while the US National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) reported a 150 percent increase in such reports from children globally from 2022 to 2023 (NCMEC 2024).

Research suggests that individuals going through adolescence often want to achieve a clearer sense of identity (Branje et al. 2021), which can co-occur with more risk-taking and sensation-seeking (Duell et al. 2018). The integration of the internet into young people's lives means that, increasingly, these developmental processes are occurring alongside the introduction of the digital landscape and online domains (Crone & Konijn 2018). The combination of these factors can result in increases in risky sexual behaviour online among adolescents, such as sharing intimate images with someone they have met in person or only know online (Madigan et al. 2018), which increases vulnerability to perpetrators of sexual extortion (Patchin & Hinduja 2024).

The impacts of sexual extortion can be diverse and severe. A systematic review of 12 studies found that experiences of sexual extortion can have adverse mental health and wellbeing outcomes for children, ranging from anxiety and shame to self-harm and suicide (Wolbers et al. 2025). The study also identified negative social impacts such as losing friends or feeling isolated, and negative impacts on victims' work, school and home life. A survey of 18- to 25-year-olds in the United States revealed that sexual extortion can sometimes be a prolonged experience, particularly if the victim was a minor at the time of the incident (Wolak et al. 2018), which may exacerbate the impacts on victims' wellbeing. Further, as cases of sexual extortion involve the production and distribution of intimate or sexual material, when the victim is a minor, incidents can contribute to the proliferation of child sexual abuse material online (eSafety Commissioner 2023b), and have associated harms for victims (Gewirtz-Meydan et al. 2018).

## Experiences of sexual extortion

There can be considerable variation in how a young sexual extortion victim meets and interacts with a perpetrator and how they experience sexual extortion (Patchin & Hinduja 2020; Wolak et al. 2018). Importantly, research into the nature and experiences of sexual extortion among young people tends to report mixed findings. Some survey-based studies indicate that sexual extortion experienced by minors is most commonly perpetrated by a current or former intimate partner (Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023, 2022; Wolak et al. 2018), while other non-survey studies (ie using data from tiplines, court documents or online posts) suggest perpetrators are more likely to be someone met online (Alsoubai et al. 2022; Australian Centre to Counter Child Exploitation (ACCCE) 2022; Canadian Centre for Child Protection (C3P) 2024; O'Malley & Holt 2022).

Differences across the literature can be attributed to diverse data sources or definitions and measures of sexual extortion. For example, a community survey of 5,568 young people aged 12 to 17 years in the United States found boys were more likely to experience sexual extortion than girls (5.8% vs 4.1%; Patchin & Hinduja 2020). Similarly, other research examining reports to tiplines found most reports were from boys (90–100%; ACCCE 2022; C3P 2024; Cross et al. 2022). Surveys of sexual extortion victims, however, tend to find victims are primarily girls (77–91%; Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2023, 2022; Wolak et al. 2018).

In addition to the mixed findings on the sociodemographic characteristics of victims and common circumstances of sexual extortion, the ways in which sexual extortion is perpetrated may also be changing. For example, emerging evidence suggests the financial gains from sexual extortion have attracted the attention of organised crime groups (Raffile et al. 2024; Thorn & NCMEC 2024). These groups may be particularly targeting young boys in large numbers to blackmail them for money (ACCCE 2022; C3P 2024; Thorn & NCMEC 2024).

Due to the constant evolution of technologies including artificial intelligence (Internet Watch Foundation 2023), and the ability for offenders to communicate with and learn from each other online (Raffile et al. 2024), changes in the nature of sexual extortion could occur rapidly. It is therefore important to better understand the scope and nature of sexual extortion of young people, to improve capacity for design and implementation of prevention and disruption approaches. The current study examines the prevalence and nature of sexual extortion among adolescents in Australia.

## Method

### Data collection and sample

This study uses data from a survey of adolescents between the ages of 16 and 18 in Australia, examining experiences of sharing sexual material, catfishing and sexual extortion. Conducted by Octopus Group Surveys in mid-2024, the survey was sent to panels of individuals who had voluntarily joined to receive incentives in exchange for completing surveys. Participants were recruited from the Octopus, Clint, PureSpectrum and Student Edge panels. Proportional quota sampling was initially used to ensure the sample was reflective of the spread of adolescents in Australia. Quotas were stratified by age, sex and usual place of residence, based on Australian Bureau of Statistics (2023) population data.

The raw completion rate for invitations sent to this panel was 4.8 percent, many of whom were ineligible because they or their children were not within the target age range of the survey. However, 23.9 percent of those eligible completed the survey. Given the sensitive subject matter of the survey, in combination with the target age group, this was a strong rate of completion. Respondents completed the survey, on average, within 11 minutes. Respondents who provided nonsensical responses or had unusually quick completion times were removed from the sample. A subsample of respondents initially contacted via their parents were also removed due to inconsistencies in the sampling procedure. Compared with the distribution created by proportional quota sampling, this resulted in slightly higher proportions of women (55.6% vs 48.7%) and 18-year-olds (44.4% vs 35.4%) and slightly lower proportions of men (41.5% vs 48.7%) and 16- (22.0% vs 28.7%) and 17-year-olds (33.6% vs 36.0%). The geographical distribution of respondents did not change notably. The findings of this research reflect the sample of 1,953 respondents who were recruited directly.

## Measures and analytical approach

The focus of this study was to gain a better understanding of adolescents' experiences of sexual extortion. To measure sexual extortion, survey respondents were asked: 'Has anyone ever demanded something from you (eg money or photos) and threatened to post or share an intimate or nude image/video of you if you didn't do what they say?' Respondents who had experienced sexual extortion were then asked follow-up questions about their experiences, focusing on the recency and frequency of the extortion, age of first experience, threats and demands received, and whether they had met the perpetrator online. We then asked more specific questions about the online platform(s) on which they met the perpetrator, whether the perpetrator asked them to switch to other platforms, and whether they complied with perpetrator demands. First, we examined the characteristics of respondents and experiences of those who were sexually extorted in their lifetime. We then focused on whether experiences differed according to the gender of respondents and whether they had met the perpetrator online.

## Sample characteristics

Of the full sample, 41.5 percent identified as men, 55.6 percent as women and 2.6 percent as trans or gender diverse (Table 1). The mean age of respondents was 17.2 ( $SD=0.8$ ), with 22.0 percent being 16 years of age, 33.6 percent 17 years of age and 44.4 percent 18 years of age. Further, 15.4 percent of respondents identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, unsure/questioning or another non-heterosexual sexual identity. One in 20 (5.5%) were Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and 9.7 percent were from a non-English-speaking background. Most respondents were studying in high school or university (84.6%), while 10.0 percent were working and 4.7 percent were neither working nor studying.

**Table 1: Sample characteristics (n=1,953)**

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Gender</b>		
Men	811	41.5
Women	1,085	55.6
Trans and gender diverse <sup>a</sup>	50	2.6
<b>Age</b>		
16	430	22.0
17	656	33.6
18	867	44.4
<b>Sexually diverse<sup>b</sup></b>	300	15.4
<b>Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander</b>	107	5.5
<b>Non-English-speaking background</b>	190	9.7
<b>Long-term health condition<sup>c</sup></b>	422	21.6
<b>Daily activity</b>		
Studying	1,652	84.6
Working	196	10.0
Not studying or working	91	4.7

a: Includes respondents who identified as trans men, trans women, non-binary, unsure/questioning, gender fluid or gender queer

b: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, unsure/questioning or another non-heterosexual sexual identity

c: Includes any health condition that has lasted, or is likely to last, 6 months or longer

Note: Denominators include respondents who were unsure or did not disclose information

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

## Limitations

This research relied on data collected by surveying adolescent members of online panels; thus, we are cautious to not generalise the findings across the wider community or beyond this age range. Our study also considers sexual extortion on an individual level rather than an incident level, meaning for adolescents who were sexually extorted more than once we are unable to determine specific details of each incident or differences between incidents.

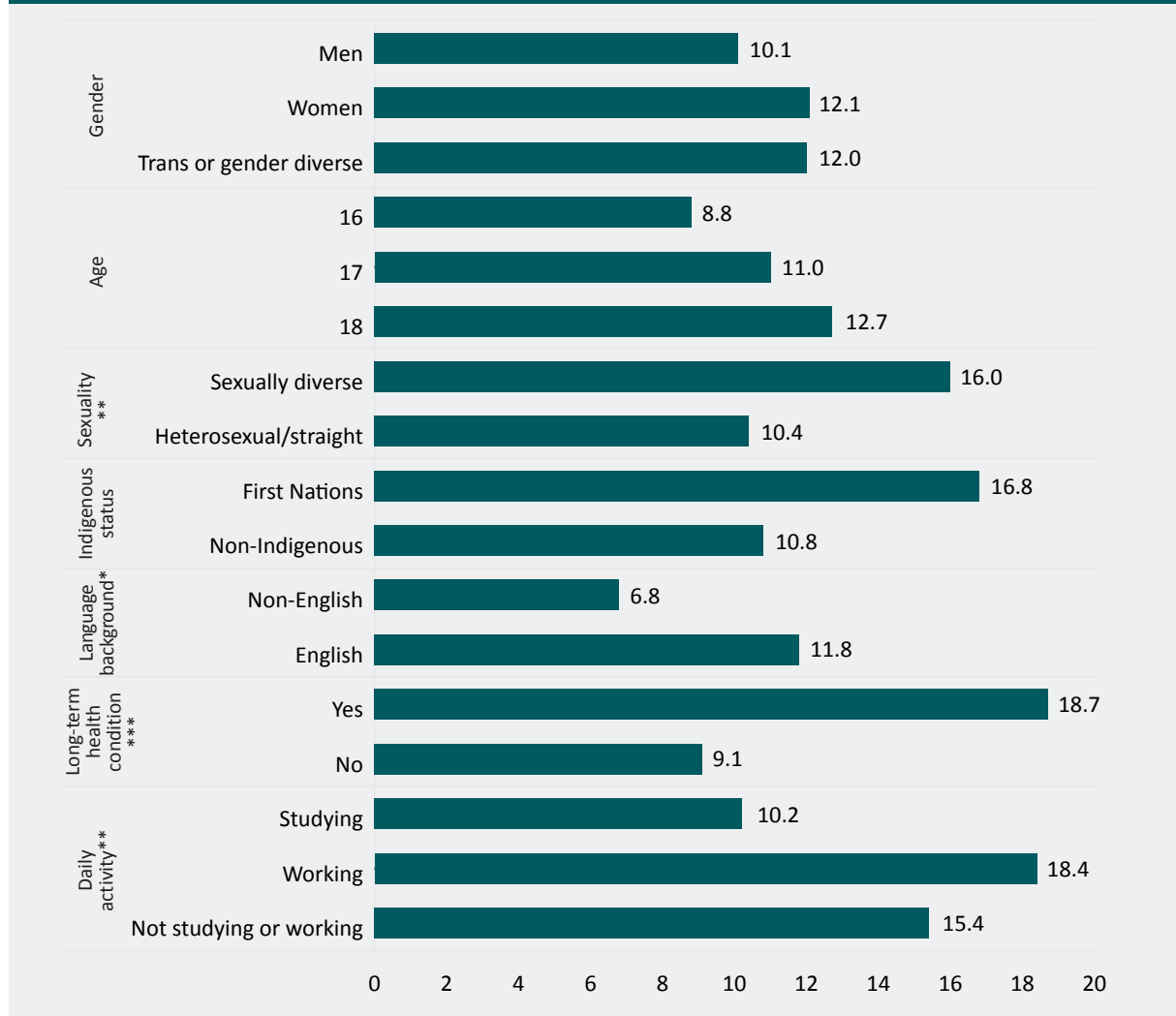
## Results

Of the full sample (n=1,953), 220 respondents or 11.3 percent indicated they had experienced sexual extortion in their lifetime (n=18 did not disclose whether they had or had not).

## Vulnerability to sexual extortion

We first examined the prevalence of sexual extortion aggregated by respondent sociodemographic characteristics and used chi-square analyses to test for associations (Figure 1). Gender was not significantly associated with sexual extortion experiences, with women (12.1%), men (10.1%) and trans or gender diverse respondents (12.0%) experiencing fairly similar rates. Each consecutive age reported experiencing higher rates of sexual extortion, but this was likely a function of opportunity, with 18-year-olds (12.7%) having had more time to experience sexual extortion than 17-year-olds (11.0%) or 16-year-olds (8.8%). Adolescents who identified as sexually diverse (16.0% vs 10.4%,  $\chi^2(1)=8.2$ ,  $p<0.01$ ), had a long-term health condition (18.7% vs 9.1%,  $\chi^2(1)=30.9$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), and came from an English-speaking background (11.8% vs 6.8%,  $\chi^2(1)=4.2$ ,  $p<0.05$ ) reported significantly higher rates of sexual extortion. Finally, adolescents who were working (18.4%), or neither working nor studying (15.4%), reported significantly higher rates of sexual extortion than those who were studying (10.2%,  $\chi^2(2)=13.6$ ,  $p<0.01$ ).

**Figure 1: Prevalence of sexual extortion, by sociodemographic characteristics (%) (n=1,953)**



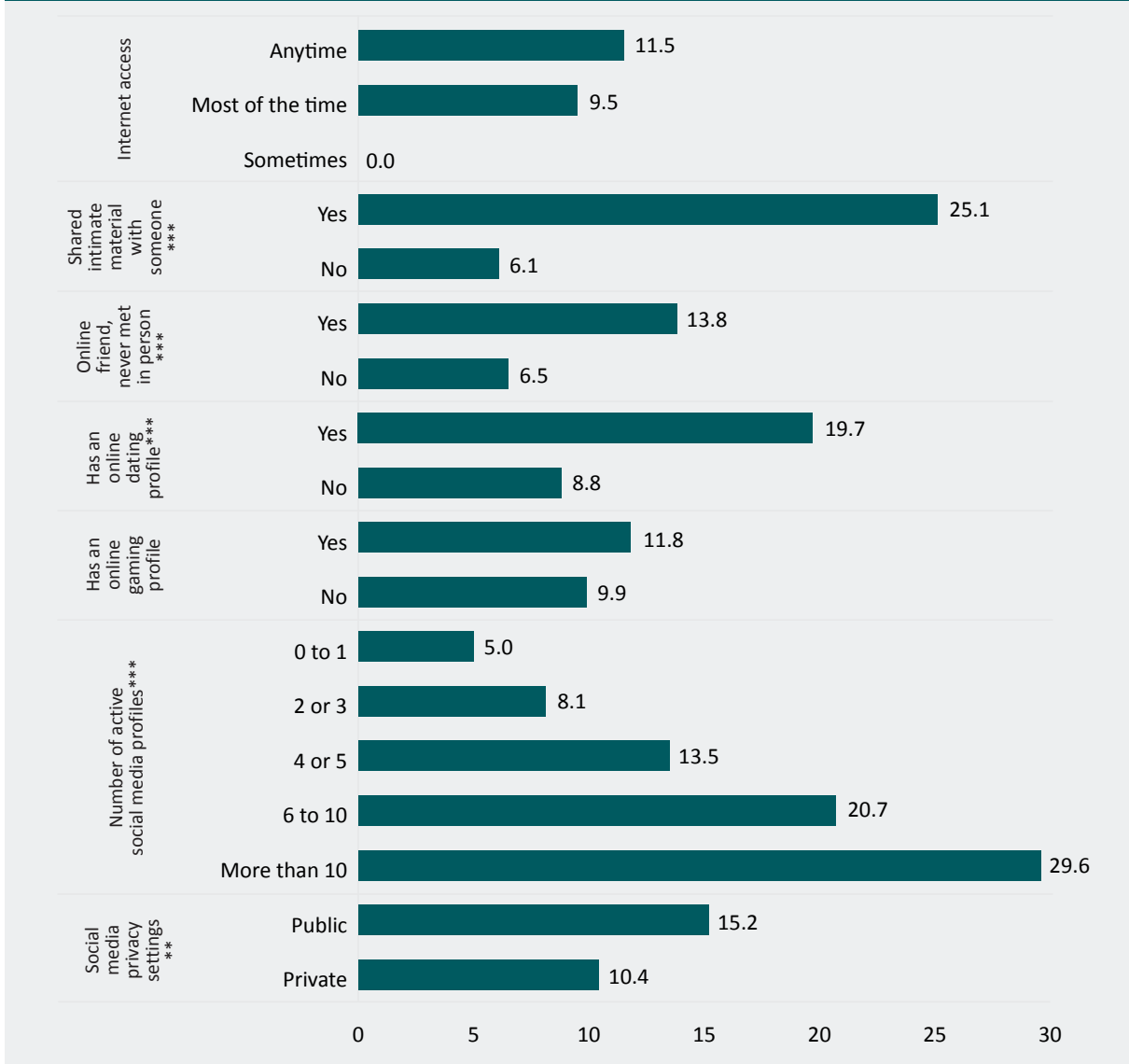
\*\*\*statistically significant at  $p<0.001$ , \*\*statistically significant at  $p<0.01$ , \*statistically significant at  $p<0.05$

Note: Denominators include respondents who did not disclose whether they had experienced sexual extortion. Missing data were excluded from chi-square tests. We did not test for an association between sexual extortion and respondent age, as any observed difference would primarily be the product of opportunity effects and would not be meaningful

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

When examining the online activities of adolescents, we observed a significantly higher prevalence of sexual extortion among adolescents who had ever shared intimate material with someone (25.1% vs 6.1%,  $\chi^2(1)=135.8, p<0.001$ ), who had an online friend they had never met in person (13.8% vs 6.5%,  $\chi^2(1)=22.9, p<0.001$ ), and who had made an online dating profile (19.7% vs 8.8%,  $\chi^2(1)=42.1, p<0.001$ ) but not a gaming profile (Figure 2). Sexual extortion was significantly more common among those who used a larger number of social media platforms ( $\chi^2(4)=42.8, p<0.001$ ), peaking at 29.6 percent among those on more than 10 social media platforms. Finally, sexual extortion was significantly less prevalent among adolescents who typically set their social media accounts to private rather than public (10.4% vs 15.2%,  $\chi^2(1)=7.4, p<0.01$ ). Level of internet access was not significantly associated with sexual extortion.

**Figure 2: Prevalence of sexual extortion, by online activities (%) (n=1,953)**



\*\*\*statistically significant at  $p<0.001$ , \*\*statistically significant at  $p<0.01$

Note: Denominators include respondents who did not disclose information. Missing data were excluded from chi-square tests. Adolescents who accessed the internet 'sometimes' were excluded from chi-square analysis because none had experienced sexual extortion

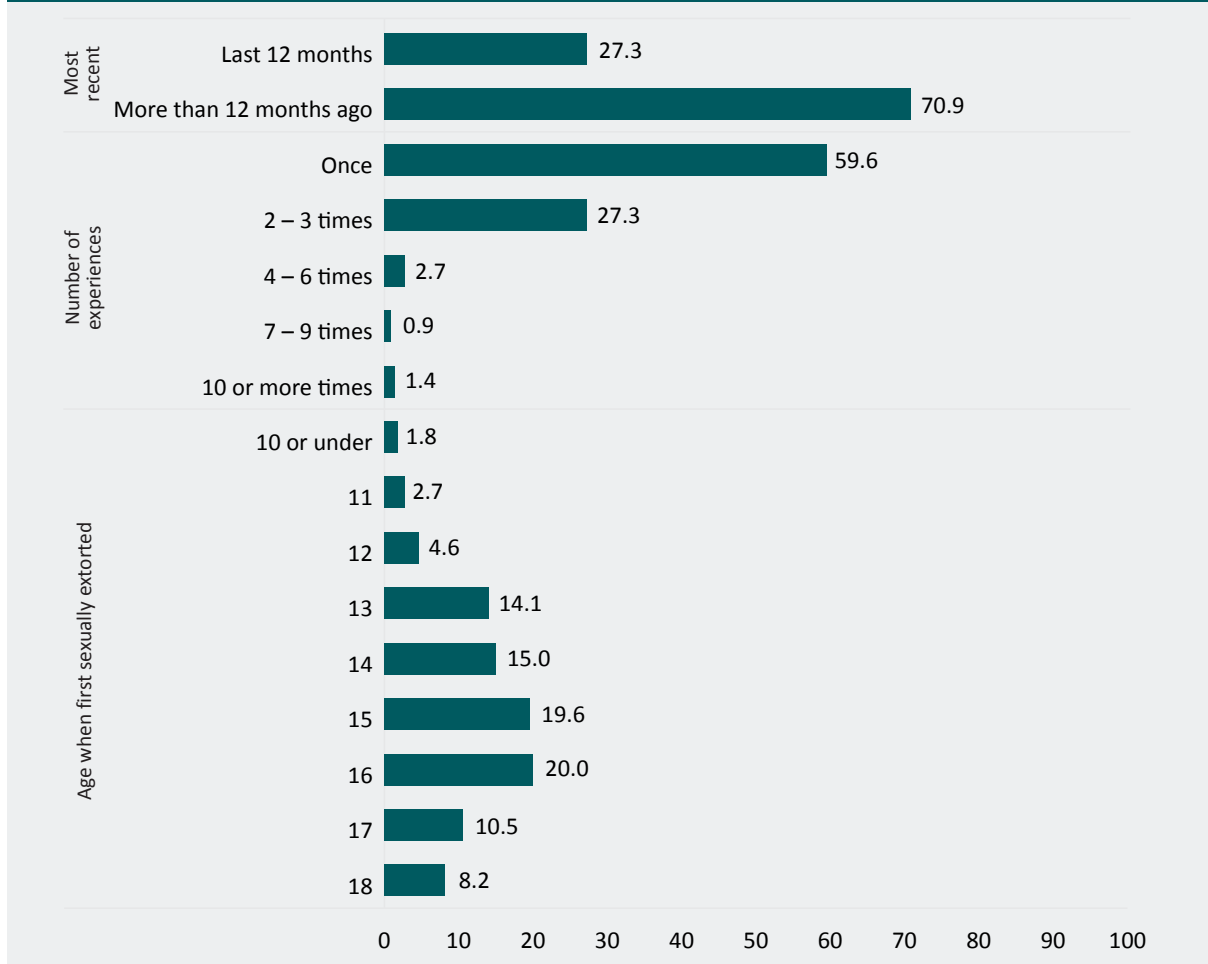
Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

## The nature of sexual extortion

### Age of victims and frequency of sexual extortion

Among adolescents who had been sexually extorted ( $n=220$ ), 27.3 percent said it happened in the last 12 months (Figure 3). While most experienced one event (59.6%), one-third experienced two or more incidents (32.3%). Of this group, the majority experienced two or three sexual extortion events (27.3%), while 5.0 percent experienced sexual extortion more than three times. Of the 220 victims, 88.2 percent ( $n=194$ ) were under the age of 18 when they were first sexually extorted, while a minority were 18 years of age (8.2%,  $n=18$ ), or did not report their age at the first incident (3.6%,  $n=8$ ). Over half of victims had been sexually extorted for the first time when under the age of 16 (57.7%), while one in 10 were under the age of 13 (9.1%). The most common age at which adolescents first experienced sexual extortion was 15 or 16 (19.6% and 20.0% respectively).

**Figure 3: Age and frequency of sexual extortion among adolescents (%) ( $n=220$ )**



Note: Denominators include respondents who did not disclose information

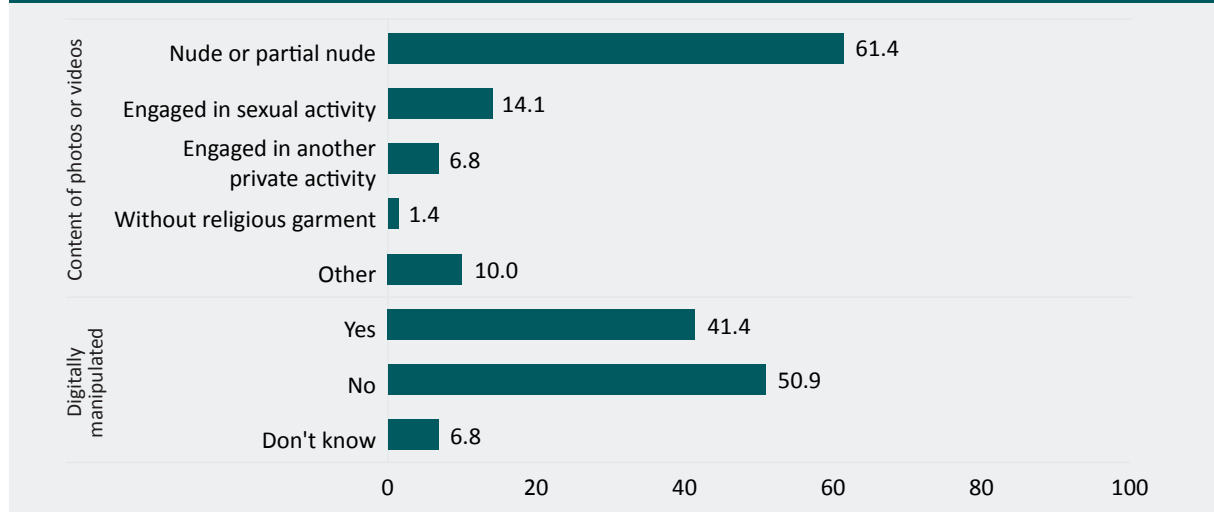
Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]



### Types of material used to sexually extort victims

The most common type of content used to perpetrate sexual extortion were photos or videos depicting adolescents as nude or partially nude (61.4%; Figure 4), followed by material depicting them engaged in sexual activity (14.1%) or in another private activity (eg using the toilet; 6.8%), and material depicting the adolescent without their religious garment (1.4%). Two in five adolescents who were sexually extorted said the extortion material had been digitally manipulated (41.4%).

**Figure 4: The nature of the material used to sexually extort adolescents (%) (n=220)**



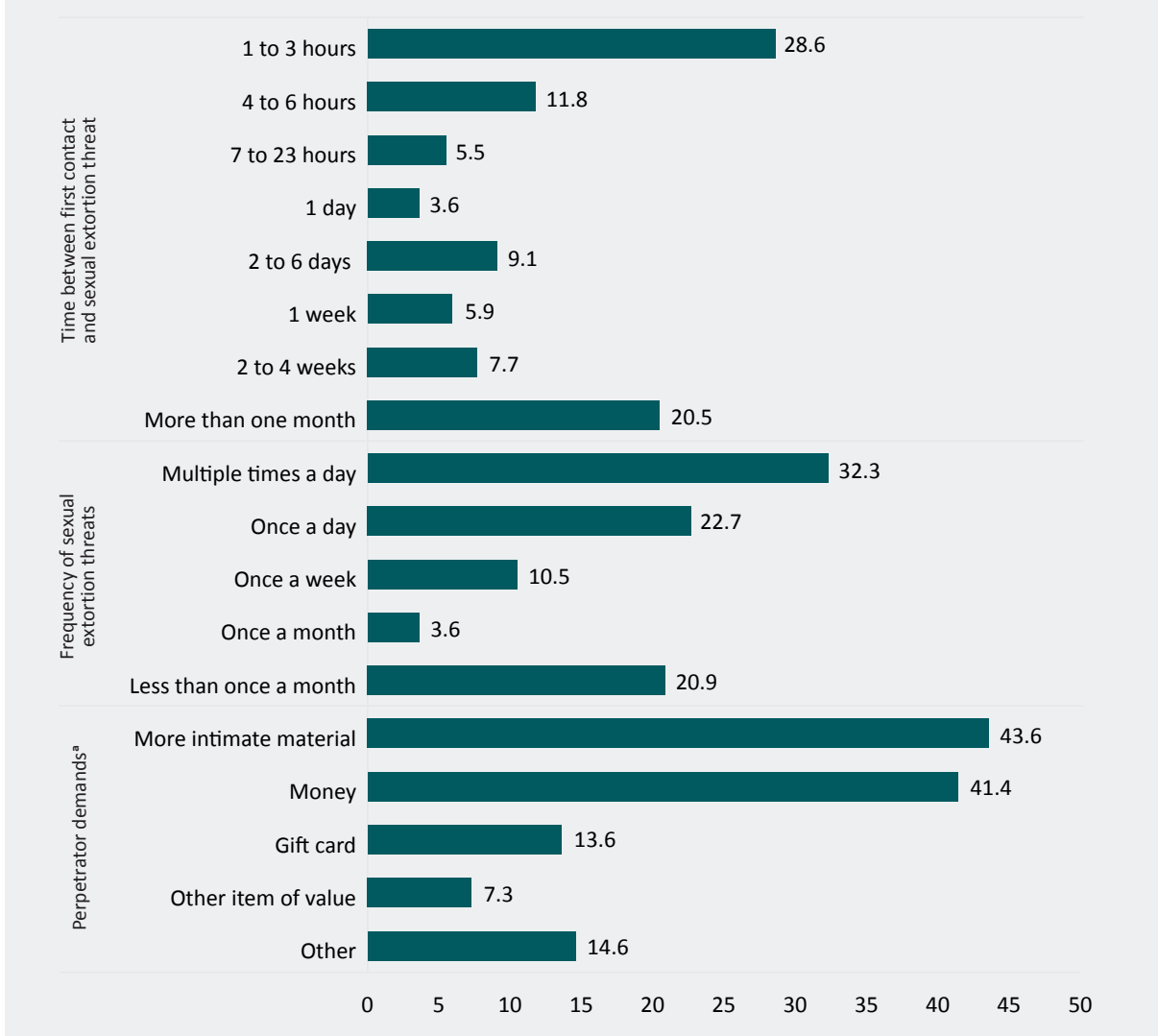
Note: Denominators include respondents who did not disclose information

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

### Characteristics of threats and demands

Most respondents said that the time between first contact with a perpetrator and the first sexual extortion threat was less than a week (58.6%; Figure 5), while just under half (45.9%) said it was less than one day. Just under a third of adolescents were threatened multiple times a day (32.3%); however, notable proportions were threatened either monthly or less (24.5%) or daily (22.7%), suggesting variation in experiences. The most common demand was for more intimate materials (43.6%), followed by money (41.4%), a gift card (13.6%) or something else of financial value (7.3%). Half of victims received a financial demand for money, a gift card or something else of financial value (50.5%). Around one in 10 adolescents received a financial demand and a demand for intimate material (9.6%; Figure 6).

**Figure 5: The nature of sexual extortion threats and demands received by adolescents (%) (n=220)**

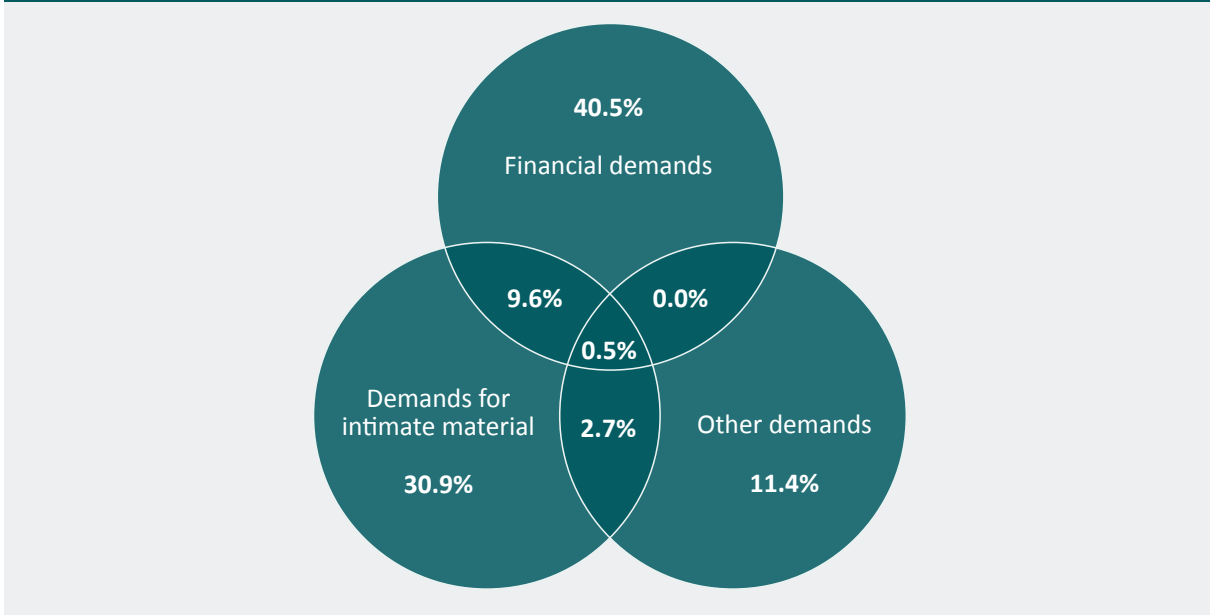


a: Respondents could select multiple options for this survey question

Note: Denominators include respondents who did not disclose information

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

**Figure 6: The overlap of the types of sexual extortion demands received by adolescents (n=220)**

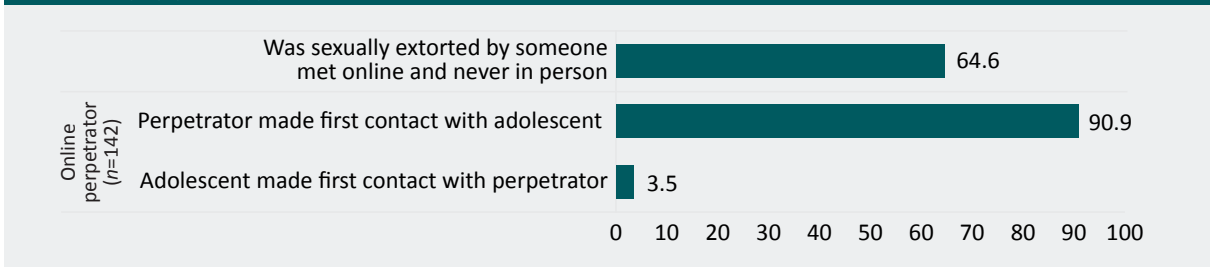


Note: Denominators include 10 respondents who did not disclose demands received  
Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

### Interactions with online perpetrators

Almost two in three (64.6%) adolescents who experienced sexual extortion said it was perpetrated by someone they had met online and had never met in person (Figure 7). Of these adolescents, 90.9 percent said the perpetrator had contacted them first, and just 3.5 percent said they had made first contact with the perpetrator.

**Figure 7: Method of initial contact with perpetrator among adolescents who were sexually extorted (%) (n=220)**

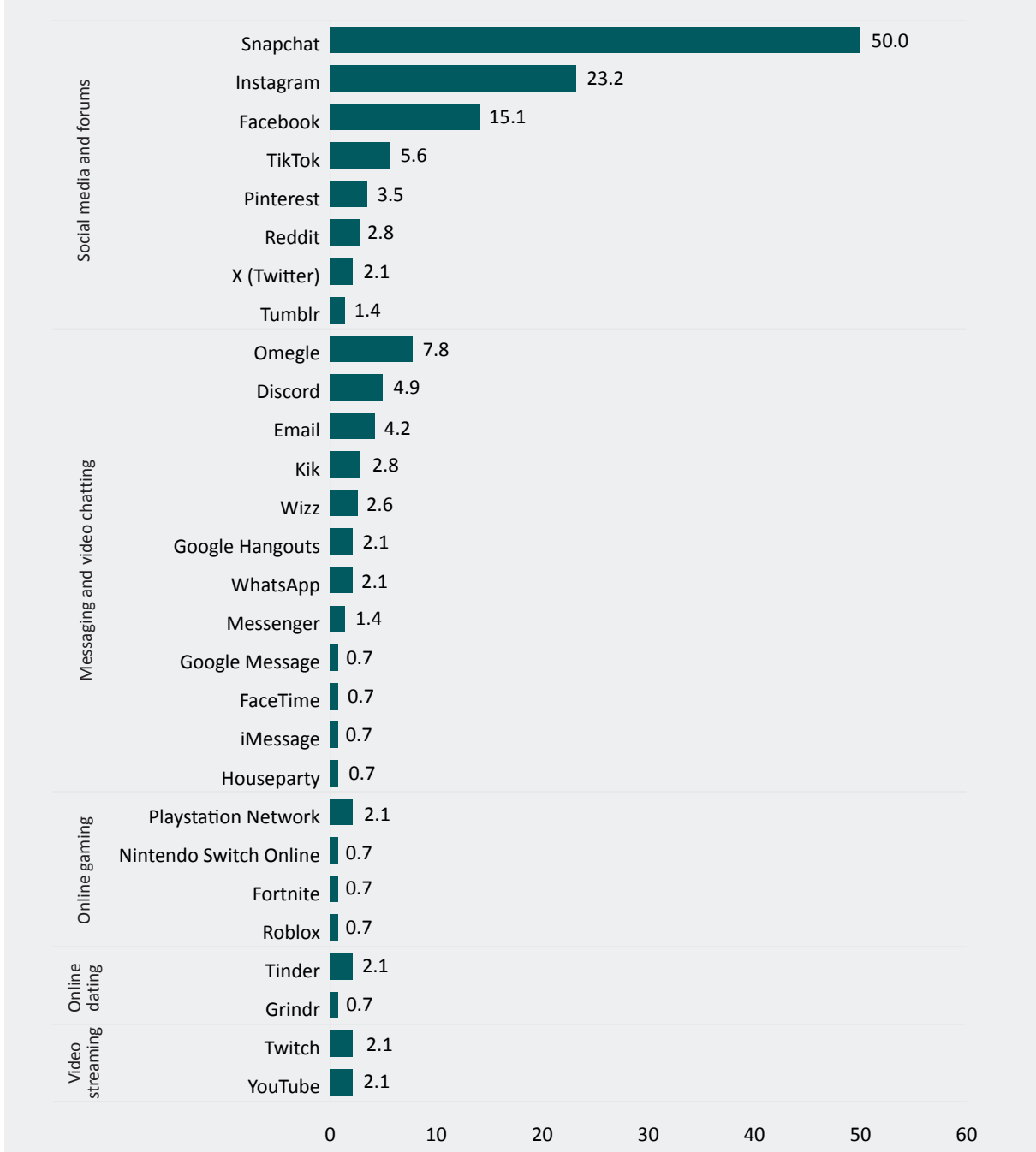


Note: Denominator includes three respondents (1.4%) who did not disclose if they had met a perpetrator online and eight respondents (5.6%) who chose not to disclose who made first contact

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

Among respondents who met the perpetrator online ( $n=142$ ), half said they met on Snapchat (50.0%), followed by Instagram (23.2%), Facebook (14.1%), Omegle (7.8%), TikTok (5.6%) and Discord (4.9%); Figure 8). Social media platforms appeared to be the most common place of meeting an online perpetrator of sexual extortion.

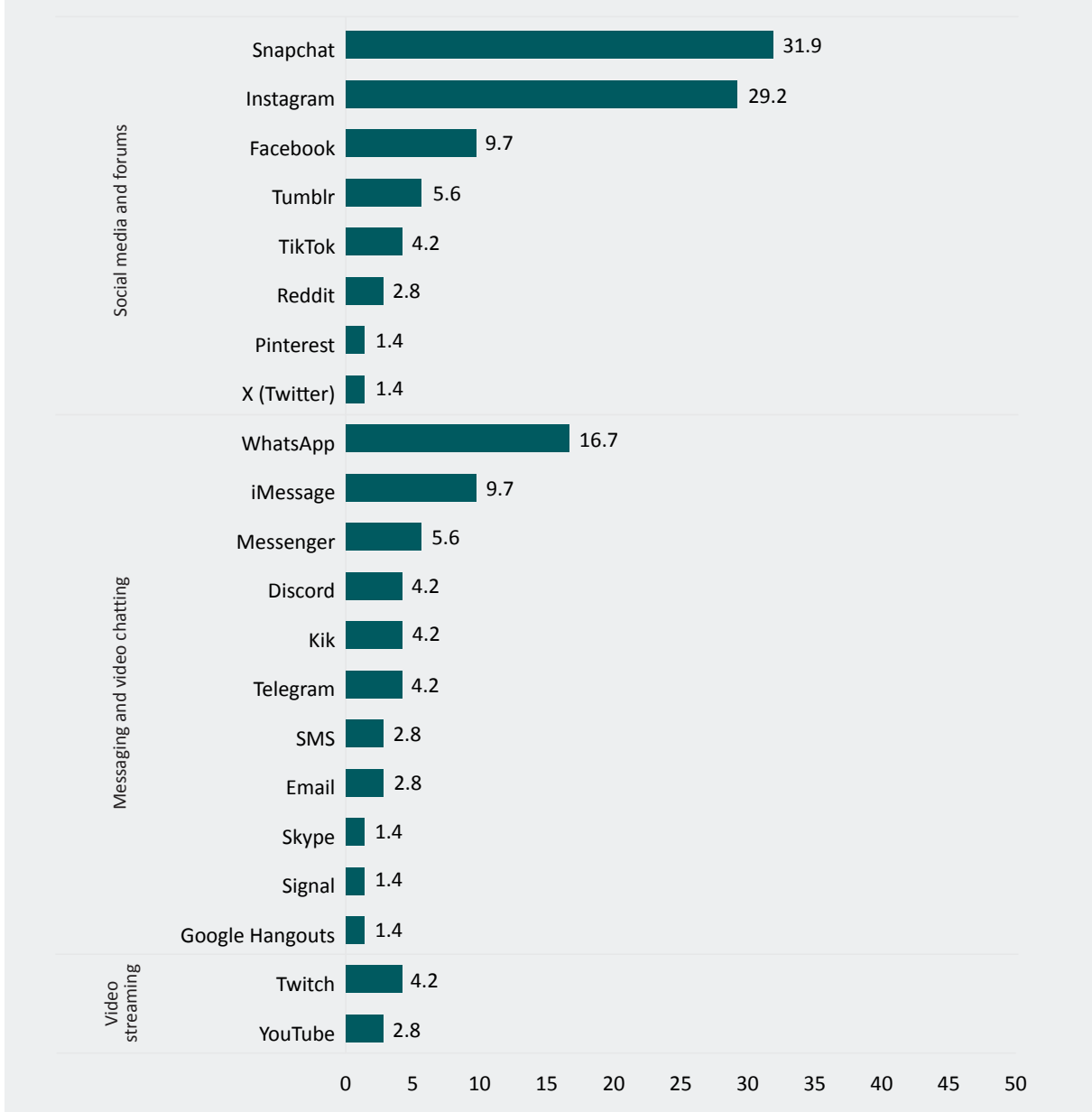
**Figure 8: Online platforms where adolescents first had contact with perpetrators of sexual extortion (%) ( $n=142$ )**



Note: Respondents could select multiple platforms, and four chose not to disclose. Platforms not selected by any respondent were not included in this figure—specifically, Signal, SMS, Telegram, Bumble, Hinge, OnlyFans, Steam, Call of Duty, Grand Theft Auto, Minecraft, Among Us, Xbox Live and Rocket League  
Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

Of the 142 respondents who had met the perpetrator online, half (50.7%) were asked by the perpetrator to switch to a new platform to continue communication. Typically, they were asked to switch to Snapchat (31.9%), Instagram (29.2%), WhatsApp (16.7%), Facebook (9.7%) or iMessage (9.7%; Figure 9).

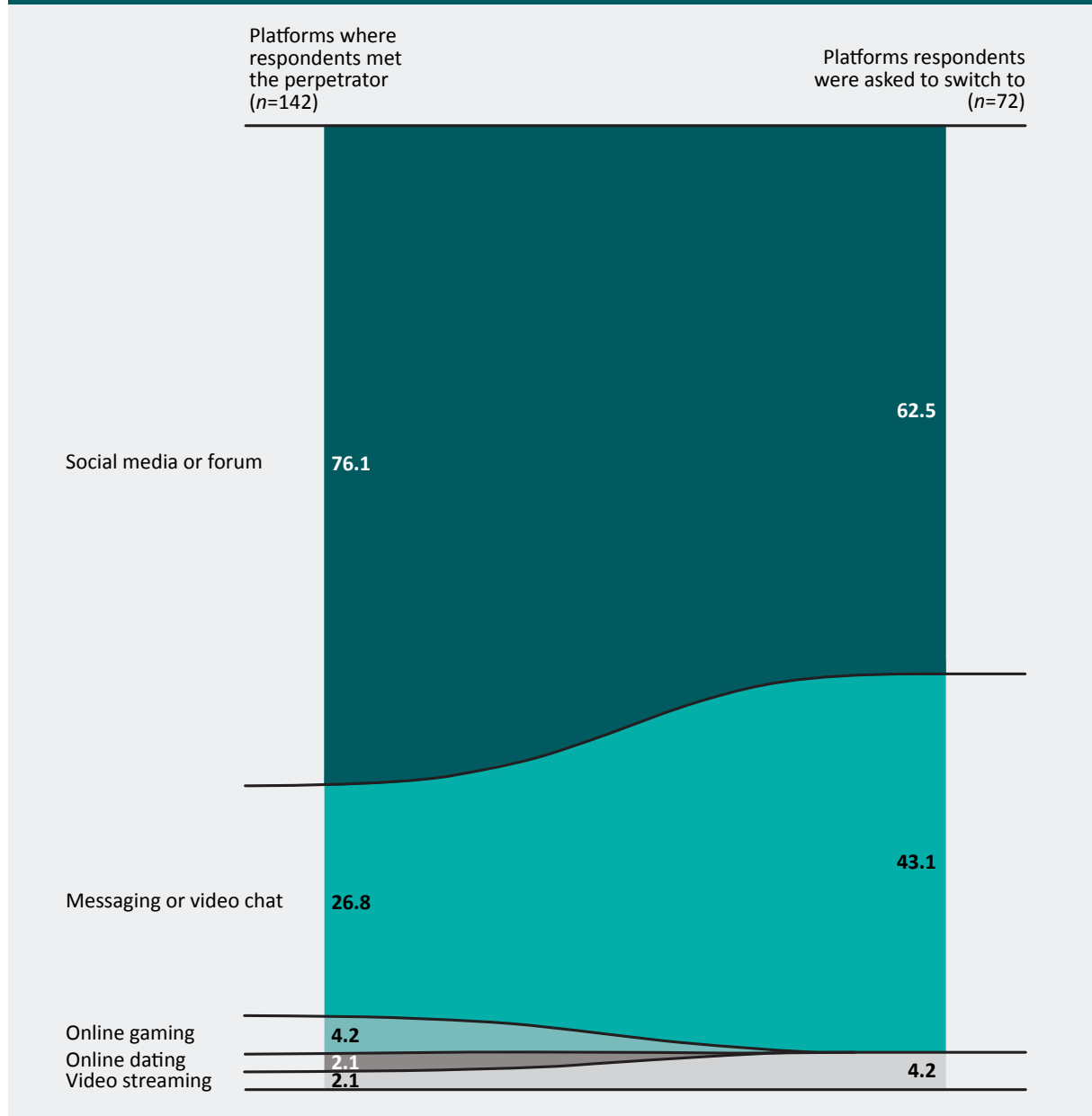
**Figure 9: Online platforms adolescents were asked to switch to in order to continue communication with perpetrator of sexual extortion (%) (n=72)**



Note: Respondents could select multiple platforms, and one chose not to disclose. Platforms not selected by any respondent were not included in this figure  
Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

Respondents who were sexually extorted most commonly met their perpetrators on social media platforms (76.1%) and less commonly were asked by perpetrators to switch to social media platforms (62.5%; Figure 10). Conversely, respondents were more commonly asked to switch to messaging and video chatting platforms versus meeting perpetrators for the first time on these platforms (43.1% vs 26.8%). A minority of respondents first met the perpetrator on an online gaming platform (4.2%), but no respondents were asked to switch to these platforms. Finally, a small proportion of respondents were asked to switch to video streaming platforms (ie Twitch or YouTube; 4.2%), while even fewer first met their perpetrators on these platforms (2.1%).

**Figure 10: Difference in proportion of platforms used to initiate contact versus switched to for continued communication (%)**



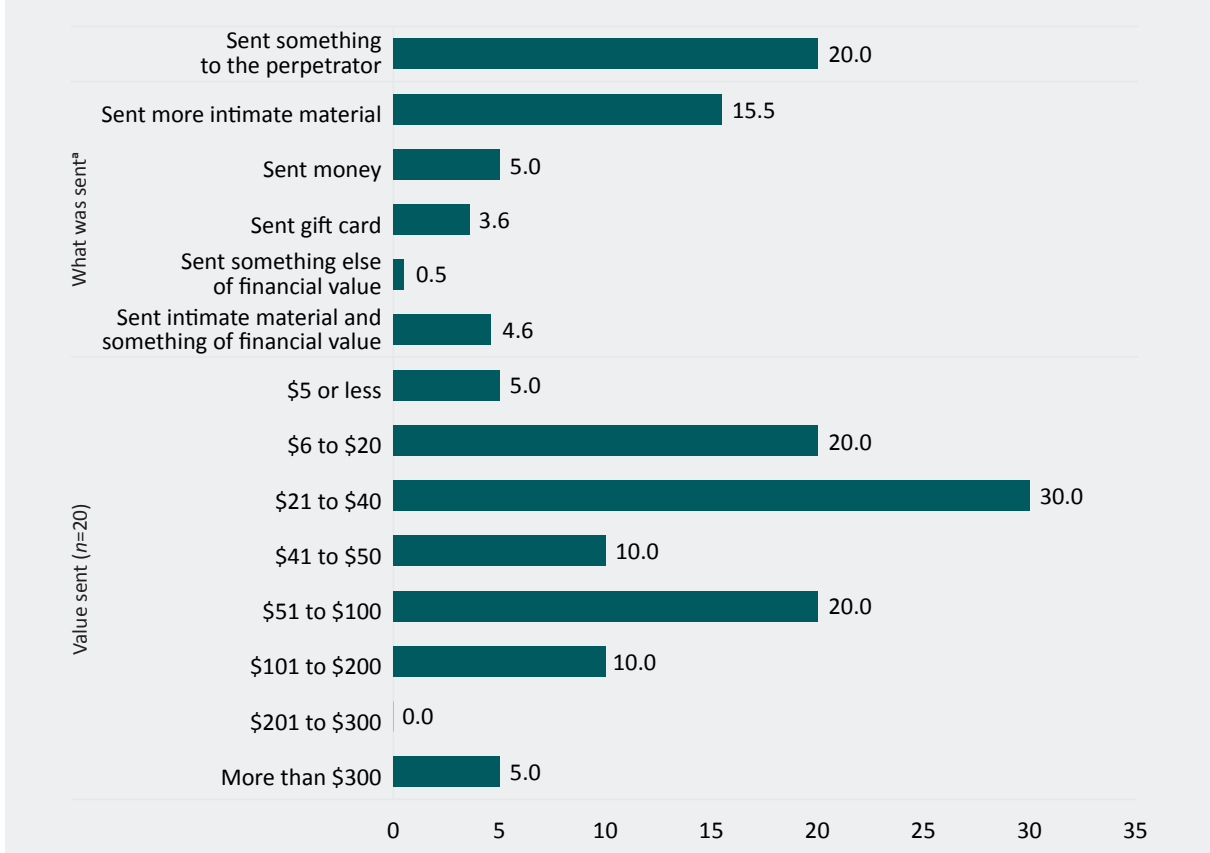
Note: Respondents could select multiple options meaning total does not equal 100 percent

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

### Compliance with demands

One in five adolescents who had been sexually extorted complied with the perpetrator’s demands (20.0%; Figure 11), meaning 2.3 percent (44/1,953) of the adolescents in our sample experienced sexual extortion and complied with demands. Although roughly equal proportions of respondents received demands for money and intimate material, those who were sexually extorted were more likely to send intimate material (15.5%) than money (5.0%), while 3.6 percent sent a gift card and 0.5 percent sent something else of financial value (ie bank details or a book). Among those who sent money, a gift card or something else of financial value ( $n=20$ ; 9.1% of those sexually extorted), most sent something worth \$50 or less ( $n=13$ , 65.0%). One respondent sent something worth over \$200.

**Figure 11: Prevalence and nature of compliance with sexual extortion demands (%) ( $n=220$ )**



a: Respondents could select multiple options for this survey question

Note: Denominators include respondents who did not disclose information

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

## Differences in experiences of sexual extortion

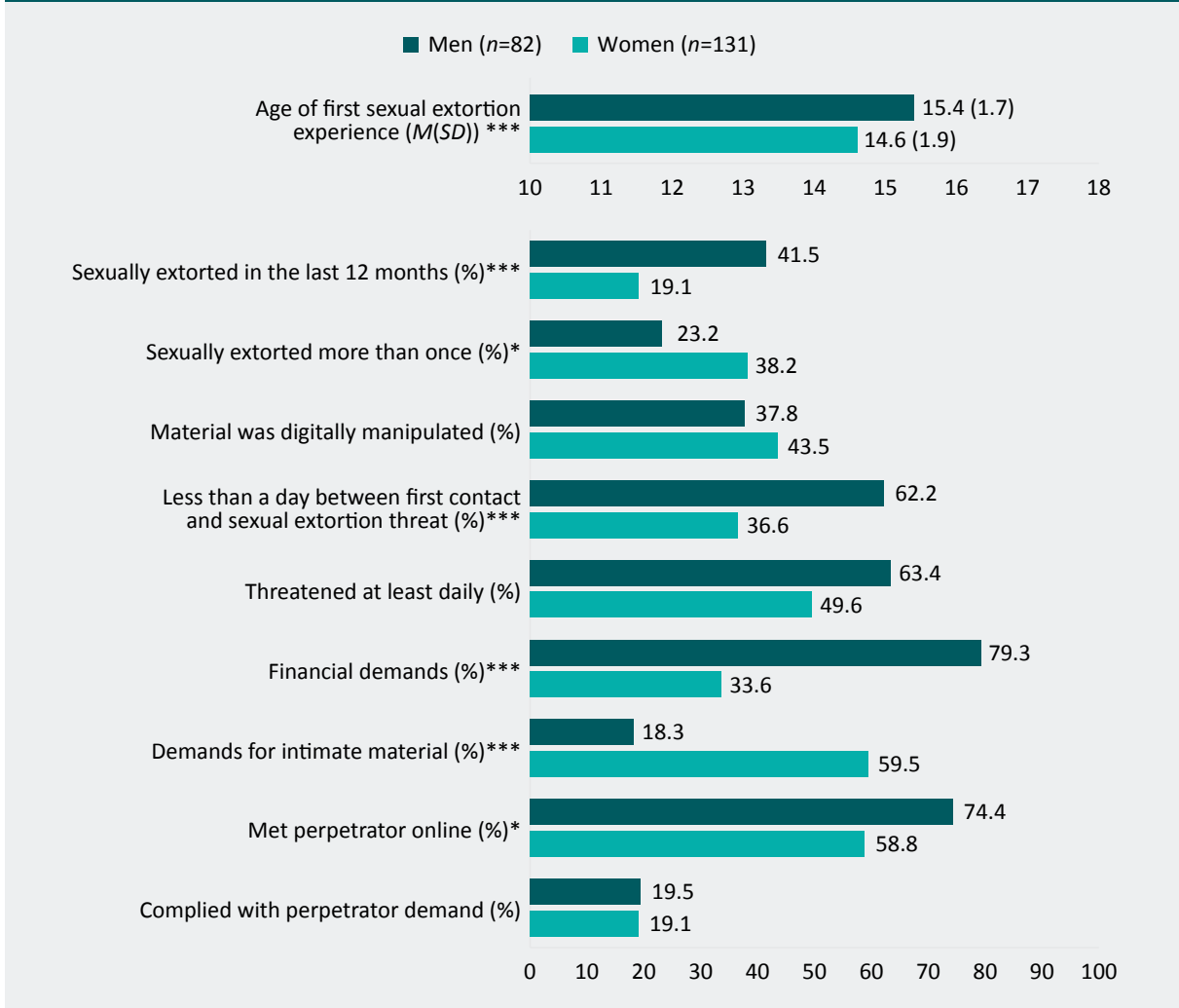
### *Gender differences*

We considered whether there were differences in how sexual extortion was experienced between genders. The average age of first sexual extortion was significantly younger for women ( $M=14.6$ ,  $SD=1.9$ ) than men ( $M=15.4$ ,  $SD=1.7$ ;  $t(204)=3.0$ ,  $p<0.01$ ; Figure 12). While women more commonly experienced sexual extortion in their lifetime (12.1% vs 10.1%; Figure 1), and were more likely to be revictimised (38.2% vs 23.2%;  $\chi^2(1)=6.7$ ,  $p<0.05$ ), men had more commonly experienced sexual extortion in the 12 months prior to the survey (41.5% vs 19.1%;  $\chi^2(1)=13.3$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Further, men were significantly more likely to receive a sexual extortion threat within one day of first contact with a perpetrator (62.2% vs 36.6%;  $\chi^2(1)=13.7$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). They were also significantly more likely to be sexually extorted by someone who they had never met in person (74.4% vs 58.8%;  $\chi^2(1)=4.8$ ,  $p<0.05$ ).

Men were significantly more likely to receive financial demands from perpetrators (79.3% vs 33.6%;  $\chi^2(1)=46.0$ ,  $p<0.001$ ), while women were more likely to receive demands for additional intimate material (59.5% vs 18.3%;  $\chi^2(1)=34.9$ ,  $p<0.001$ ). Finally, there were no significant differences observed between genders on experiences of sexual extortion using digitally manipulated material, receiving threats at least daily, or compliance with demands. We were unable to include trans and gender diverse respondents in this analysis due to the small number that experienced sexual extortion ( $n=6$ ).



**Figure 12: Differences in sexual extortion experiences by gender**



\*\*\*statistically significant at  $p < 0.001$ , \*statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$

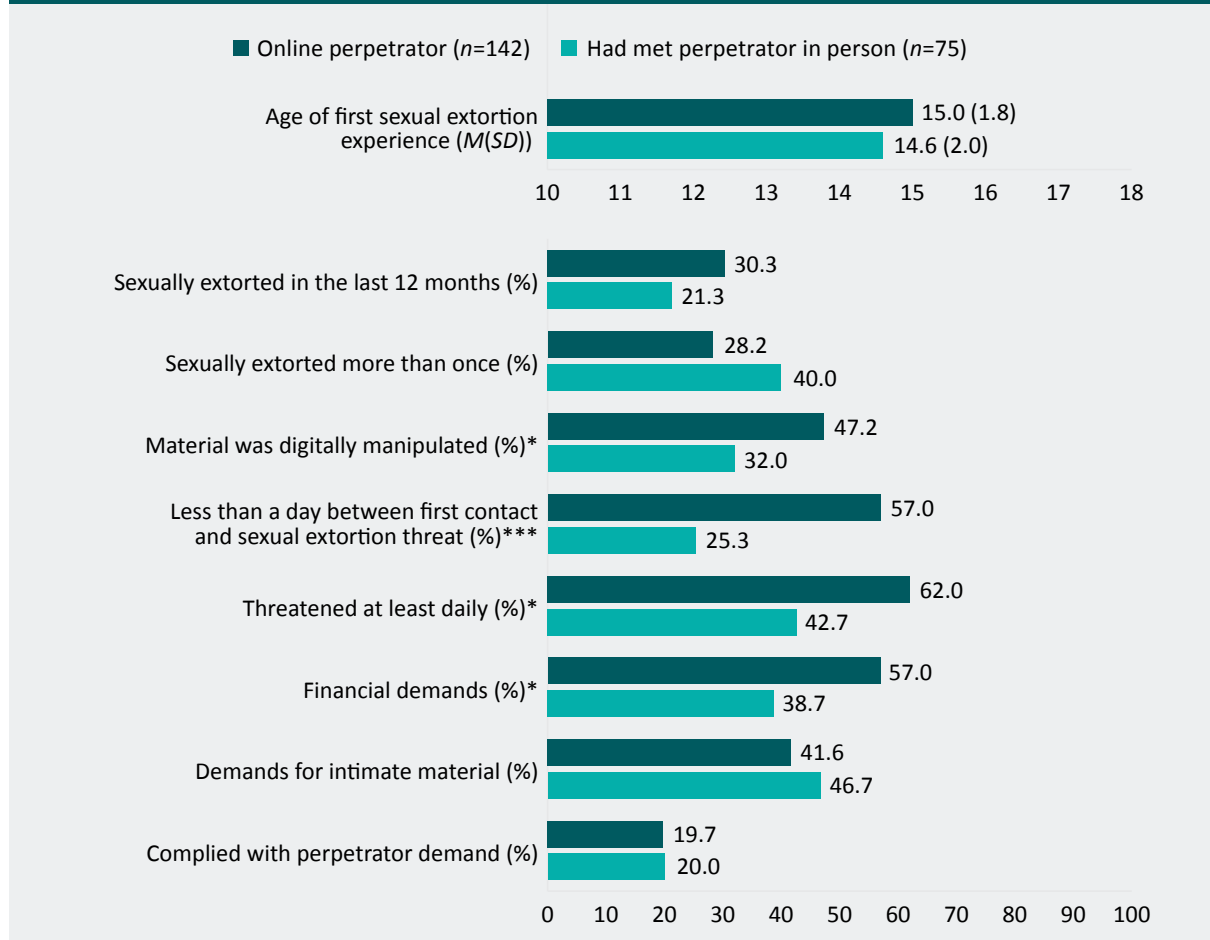
Note: Denominators include respondents who did not disclose information. Missing data were excluded for bivariate analyses. M=mean; SD=standard deviation

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]

### Online only sexual extortion versus known perpetrators

Of those who had experienced sexual extortion, 64.6 percent said the perpetrator was a person they had only met online and never in person (Figure 13). Adolescents who had only met the perpetrator online were significantly more likely than other victims to have been extorted using digitally manipulated material (47.2% vs 32.0%;  $\chi^2(1)=4.9, p<0.05$ ), to have less than a day between first contact and sexual extortion threat (57.0% vs 25.3%;  $\chi^2(1)=18.6, p<0.001$ ), to have been threatened at least daily (62.0% vs 42.7%;  $\chi^2(1)=6.4, p<0.05$ ), and to have received a financial demand (57.0% vs 38.7%;  $\chi^2(1)=6.3, p<0.05$ ). Finally, there were no significant differences observed between the average age of respondents when first sexually extorted, revictimisation, recency of sexual extortion, demands for intimate material or the prevalence of complying with demands, based on how the victim knew the perpetrator.

**Figure 13: Differences in sexual extortion experiences based on whether adolescents had met the perpetrator online or in person**



\*\*\*statistically significant at  $p<0.001$ , \*statistically significant at  $p<0.05$

Note: Denominators include respondents who were unsure or did not disclose information. These individuals were removed for bivariate analyses

Source: AIC survey of adolescents, 2024 [computer file]











## Discussion

Over one in 10 adolescents (11.3%) in our sample had experienced sexual extortion in their lifetime. The prevalence of sexual extortion in our study was higher than those from previous research using survey data from young people (eg 3.5 to 5%; Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2022; Patchin & Hinduja 2020), which may be explained by the use of differing definitions of sexual extortion, sample characteristics or recruitment methods. Despite these differences, the higher prevalence may indicate a substantial increase in sexual extortion among young people in recent years. Importantly, the present study used a community sample, and while these estimates cannot be generalised to other age groups, they are likely similar to the lifetime prevalence estimates of sexual extortion among adolescents across Australia between 16 and 18 years of age.

Similar to broader research on online child sexual exploitation (eg Teunissen et al. 2024), certain characteristics and online behaviours appeared to signal greater vulnerability to sexual extortion among adolescents. In particular, those who identified as sexually diverse and those who had a long-term health condition had higher rates of victimisation. Vulnerability was also heightened among those who had shared intimate material with someone, or had an online friend they had never met in person, an online dating profile, a larger number of social media profiles, and social media profiles set to public rather than private. Future research should continue to explore online activities and vulnerability to sexual extortion, especially given perpetrators infrequently used dating platforms to initiate contact. Increased visibility online, by virtue of using these platforms, may allow perpetrators to gather useful information before approaching adolescents on social media.

Importantly, sexual extortion appeared to vary substantially between cases, and in particular between genders, emphasising the heterogeneous nature of incidents. See Box 1 for a summary of sexual extortion experiences.

**Box 1: Summary of experiences among adolescents who had been sexually extorted (n=220)**

	<b>27.3%</b> Were sexually extorted in the last 12 months
	<b>32.3%</b> Were sexually extorted more than once
	<b>57.7%</b> Were sexually extorted when under the age of 16
	<b>41.4%</b> Were sexually extorted with digitally manipulated materials
	<b>45.9%</b> Received a sexual extortion threat less than one day after first contact with the perpetrator
	<b>55.0%</b> Received sexual extortion threats daily
	<b>50.5%</b> Received a demand for something of financial value
	<b>43.6%</b> Received a demand for intimate material
	<b>64.6%</b> Were sexually extorted by someone they had met online and never in person
	<b>20.0%</b> Complied with sexual extortion demands

Sexual extortion experiences differed based on whether adolescents had ever met the perpetrator in person, and on gender. Adolescents who had met a perpetrator solely online often said the extortion began soon after first contact, threats were frequent, and they had received financial demands. Our findings are consistent with evidence of an increase in sexual extortion perpetrated by strangers as a type of profit-motivated cybercrime, perhaps carried out by organised crime groups (Raffile et al. 2024; Thorn & NCMEC 2024).

Men more often said they had been sexually extorted recently, that the extortion began soon after meeting the perpetrator, that the extortion was financially motivated and that they had only met the perpetrator online. In contrast, women tended to be younger when first extorted, to experience greater time between meeting the perpetrator and the first threat, and to receive demands for intimate material. They also knew the perpetrator in person more often and were more frequently revictimised. Although it was beyond the scope of the survey to determine, these findings could indicate that young men are more likely to be targeted by organised crime groups seeking financial benefit (Raffile et al. 2024) and young women are more likely to be targeted by sexually motivated offenders. However, it is important to note that while men appeared to experience more financially motivated extortion, it is possible that intimate materials were extorted from women to be sold or distributed for financial benefit.

The prevalence of being sexually extorted by someone met solely online is much higher in our study than prior survey research (64.6% vs 13.6% Finkelhor, Turner & Colburn 2022; vs 27.2% Patchin and Hinduja 2020). Patchin and Hinduja (2020) found 24.2 percent of male victims and 17.4 percent of female victims in their sample had been sexually extorted by someone they only knew online, compared to 74.4 percent of male victims and 58.8 percent of female victims in our sample. While both studies reported a higher prevalence among men, the present study reported a higher overall prevalence among both genders, when compared with Patchin and Hinduja (2020). Although this difference may be partially attributed to the samples differing geographically (United States vs Australia) and in the age of respondents (12–17 years vs 16–18 years), it could also indicate a recent increase in sexual extortion perpetrated by strangers online.

## Implications

The prevalence of sexual extortion identified in the current study is concerning given the significant and varied impacts associated with victimisation (Wolbers et al. 2025). Our findings emphasise the importance of diverse and holistic prevention approaches to address the differing forms of sexual extortion experienced by adolescents. We identified several online platforms on which adolescents reported contact by perpetrators. While perpetrators commonly used popular social media platforms including Snapchat and Instagram to first contact adolescents, we found adolescents were being asked to switch to secondary platforms, including messaging platforms with end-to-end encryption (eg WhatsApp and iMessage). The use of encrypted communication to carry out sexual extortion introduces challenges for detection and deterrence. Yet, for most victims, sexual extortion took place on open and popular social media and messaging platforms—presenting opportunities for these platforms to take proactive action.

In particular, it would be useful to implement Safety by Design principles, which put user safety and rights at the centre of the design and development of online products and services (eSafety Commissioner 2024). Risk indicators such as the rapid creation of multiple accounts from the same device, attempted contact with many young people at once or the use of certain phrases or usernames associated with extortion should alert online platforms to suspicious accounts.

Separately, approaches that reduce the risk of adolescents being contacted by strangers online may have a significant impact on the occurrence of sexual extortion. Two in five adolescents who were sexually extorted reported that their intimate images had been digitally manipulated. This points to a need to ensure privacy settings for young users are set to their maximum by default, preventing malicious actors from contacting young people online or accessing their social media profiles. It also indicates a need to educate young people about the risks of sexual extortion and manipulation of images. In cases where the perpetrator is not an online stranger but a trusted friend or a current or former intimate partner, education approaches could equip adolescents with knowledge of risky online behaviours and where to seek help, as well as drawing attention to early intervention programs.

In addition to prevention, the scale of sexual extortion suggests victims may require support, including emotional or financial support and advice about what to do and how to remove intimate material posted online if the perpetrator follows through on their threats. Prior research has shown that sexual extortion can be a prolonged experience without intervention (Açar 2016; Alsoubai et al. 2022; Wolak et al. 2018), contributing to significant and ongoing negative impacts among victims. Similarly, reporting mechanisms must be accessible and age appropriate for adolescents, as research shows many young people do not report sexual extortion (Patchin & Hinduja 2020; Wolak et al. 2018). Adolescents may also require a reporting mechanism they recognise as safe, particularly where impacts may include legal repercussions (eg for producing and sharing CSAM; Wolbers et al. 2025). Given the present study examined bivariate comparisons between adolescents who had and had not been sexually extorted, a future paper will examine the factors that increase the risk of sexual extortion among adolescents in more depth and discuss the findings in greater detail.

## Conclusion

Using a national community-level sample, this research found that more than one in 10 adolescents residing in Australia may have experienced sexual extortion. These experiences appear to be highly diverse. There were considerable differences in victimisation based on the gender of adolescents and whether the perpetrator was someone met solely online or whether the victim had known them in person. Understanding differences in sexual extortion dynamics according to perpetrator behaviours and victim characteristics can help guide prevention and intervention activities. These approaches must be multifaceted and collaborative, bringing together law enforcement, government, financial institutions and, in particular, the tech sector to increase detection and intervention and reduce the opportunity for perpetration.

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